

The Good from the Bad

And we know that God causes all things
to work together for the good to those
who love God, to those who are called
according to *His* purpose.

Romans 8:28



Privilege, Knowledge, Purpose

Mike Miller

With Leslie Hudson

Spring 2020

The Day Our Church Changed

I sat on March 17, 2020 in the conference room with the pastors of First Baptist Church asking that they go to their office, get their things, and head home. I said to them, "I don't know when we will be back together but we need to honor the request of the President and the Governor regarding stay at home restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic."

Psalm 31:15 has never been more meaningful than now; "My times are in Your hands." I left church that day thinking that in a few days I would be back to my normal routine, but now after many weeks separated from church, friends, and ministry, life as I have known for almost 50 years, my personal life, family, church and country have changed!

And the good news is that God has brought good from the bad in these days of pandemic! As the days of stay-at-home began I received questions from numerous people about the situation that we all have been asking ourselves during this pandemic.

Questions like:

- What do we learn about life in times that seem to be uncontrollable, accidental, and disorienting?
- What do we do when all around there is fear and dread and terror?
- Why would God allow this to happen?
- How long will we be in this situation?
- Is all of this just a bad joke or dream?

Don't dread their dread or fear their fear! (see Isaiah 8:12-13)

I was in prayer and Bible reading early one morning in February of 2020. I was reading through Isaiah in my time with the Lord, journaling what the Lord was saying to me from His word. My reading came to Isaiah 8: 12-13: "...you are not to fear what they fear or be in dread of it. It is the Lord of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He shall be your fear, and He shall be your dread."

In my times of being in God's word in all these years I have learned when God is clearly giving me something, He wants me to understand and obey. On that February morning the Lord was preparing me for the world-wide pandemic to come! His words were clear: no fear of their fear; no dread of their dread! Fear God!

Since that day, God began to put in my heart some truths around the theme of Romans 8:28 that He wanted the members of First Baptist Church to hear. So every Sunday and Wednesday for eight weeks I have preached alone with the Lord to an iPhone the messages God has put on my heart for my dear friends at First Baptist during our times of separation. These messages are for you, First Baptist Church and friends of our church! I labored to speak words that would

challenge and encourage you every day in these days of worldly dread and fear! I have expanded on these messages to provide you with something to keep and use in your devotional time, to remind you of how God has brought good from the bad during this pandemic!

To the glory of God!

Your pastor, Mike Miller - May 2020

“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” Rom. 8:28

(Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from the New American Standard Bible.)

Introduction

By Leslie Hudson

For weeks before the governor instructed us to stay home, the COVID-19 threat was something *there*, not *here*. It was in Asia, then Europe; surely it would stop soon.

But when a church—MY church—shuttered its doors, we all knew it was *here*. We didn't know how much everyday life would change or what the change would look like, but nothing was untouched. And even as I write these words, months after the pandemic's onset, I wonder if it will ever be the same. Our understanding of spreading germs and protecting our community may cause us to pause for years to come. Like the death of Elvis or the attacks on the Twin Towers, this will be one of those moments where everything hinged on how it affected each person individually.

It wasn't just our church that changed. It was everything: grocery shopping with a mask. Driving past our favorite restaurants at dinner time, dark and locked. Worrying for friends and family who were working in healthcare or whose health was compromised.

My family slowed down. We built a trail in the back yard, we planted a huge garden, and we spent more time fishing. And since we didn't suffer from the virus, we actually came to accept our new normal as different but okay. We had to learn to be more patient and gracious, we had to reconsider what was important, and we had to adjust what we thought was *normal life* and realize that was the *pre-pandemic life*. And it may not be back.

Through the eight weeks when our church was prohibited from having corporate worship, my family and I gathered on the couch and watched Sunday services online. *And we loved it*. We loved seeing the choir, even if we knew it was pre-recorded. We loved seeing the Shepherd family worshipping in their home. My kids monitored Pastor Mike's facial hair as it grew in and thought it was odd that he could preach sitting down at a table in a house instead of standing in a sanctuary.

Mike asked me to help him shape his sermon outlines into letters, so you could consider me to be an expert on the scriptures, points, and content of those 16 lessons. As I read them, I saw a new reality of the Good From the Bad series: I would need this in the future. COVID-19 was not the last time I would need to know that God plans good in my bad. It would not be the last time I asked, "How long?" or "Why?" or "What's really going on?"

So, I hope you gain the comfort from these sermons that I received. I hope you keep these letters and use them as a household reference. I hope you find peace and joy in the truths that Mike spoke, finding faith in the fact that they are everlasting, eternal truths, not just for *now*, but for the next time, as well.

Your friend,
Leslie

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God's Word in the Days of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Week 1 of Stay at Home
Sunday – Romans 8:28
All Things for Good

Dear Church,

You've heard—and perhaps memorized—these words:

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

You've no doubt found comfort in these words throughout your life. But now you may be wondering, “All things? What about during a pandemic and quarantine and so much doubt and fear and unrest?”

These are trying times; hard times; difficult times. We don't know what will come tomorrow and we don't know what our world will look like a week or a month or a year from now. But we can find confidence in the fact that there are truths we can know in every situation and *in all things*. **We know that God brings good from the bad.** Let's consider a few of those today.

All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose. We can believe God and we can believe His Word; these eternal truths apply even today! **First, there is privilege** for the followers of Jesus in that all things are good. Let's consider some “we know” statements from one book, 1 John:

- We know that we have passed from death to life (1 John 3:14).
- We know that we have come to know Him as we keep His commandments (1 John 2:3).
- We know that this is the last hour (1 John 2:18).
- We know that we are children of God (1 John 3:2).
- We know that, when He appears, we will be like Him (1 John 3:2).
- We know that we abide in Him (1 John 4:13).
- We know that He hears us in whatever we ask, and we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him (1 John 5:15).
- We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19).

Oh church, the privilege for God's people is to know—to possess a holy confidence—that, in all the circumstances of life, God is causing good to come of it all!

There is also an excellency in God causing all things to work together for good. The Greek word for *causes* in Romans 8:28 is a medical word describing the mixing of two harmful medicines to make a good medicine. Not only is He the Great Physician; He is the great pharmacist!

And God's providence works best for His saints:

- "I will cry to God Most High, to God who accomplishes all things for me" (Psalm 57:2)
- "The Lord will accomplish what concerns me" (Psalm 138:8)
- He who loves God and is called according to His purpose may be assured and confident that all things work for Good.
- "All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth to such as keep His covenants" (Proverbs 25:10)

Even the worst things can be for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose. Consider the Bible: Daniel was thrown into the lion's den and was saved from certain death. Joseph's brothers sold him to slave traders, but he found himself the second in command of all Egypt. Oh church, our times are no different!

God is at work in allowing bad to come to His people. We are foolish to think that following Jesus will lead to a life of ease and lack of trouble; Jesus told us, "In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have conquered the world," (John 16:33). Consider the words of Job: he lost his children, he lost all his belongings, and he even lost his health. But in it all he still said, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord," (Job 1:21). So, too, the early church, after God filled His people with the Spirit at Pentecost, found themselves scattered by intense persecution. God used that situation to spread the Gospel around the globe. Even today, believers are disciplined through the bad to grow in Christlikeness.

Personal Study Question: What have been three difficult times in your life? How did God help you to grow into Christlikeness through those times?

None of God's people seek out trouble; in fact, we'd much prefer a trouble-free life! But in God's kingdom our troubles work for good. Consider God's word in Jeremiah 24:5, "Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the captives of Judah, whom I have sent out of this place into the land of the Chaldeans." As Jeremiah reminded His disobedient children in Israel, God used troubles for their good! It's like a parent reminding a disobedient child, "I am doing this for your good!" We can also learn from the psalmist when he said, "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes," (Psalm 119:71). God's word comes alive in times of trial. We learn the meaning of suffering in our trials, and we learn to trust in God and follow Him with determination and confidence in the darkest hour.

Can you say, "It is good for me to be in this time of pandemic to learn God's Word?" I would challenge you to consider this very trying time as one that helps you desire and depend ever more on the Bible.

Here are a few things to remember as I close today.

- Troubles teach believers about sin: they reveal our sinful tendencies, idolatry, and selfishness.
- Troubles teach believers about self: God uses trials to reveal the real you to you!
- Troubles make us holy: God takes away so that we may draw close to Him in our times of need.
- Troubles make believers more like the Lord Jesus: more patient, kind, gentle, and humble.
- Troubles help believers kill sin: when the Holy Spirit shows us our sin, He also empowers us to repent and forsake it.
- Troubles loosen the believer's love for the world: as we let go of our thoughtless attachments to things and routines that are not of God, we seek His plan more than our normal.
- Troubles make way for comfort: we can have confident hope that today's troubles plant the seeds for tomorrow's comfort.

Consider the story of Joshua 7, in which Achan stole and hid the treasures that the Lord had commanded them NOT to take when they triumphed over the city of Ai. Achan and his family were stoned to death, and the valley where they were buried came to be known as the valley of Achor. What a terrible time of sin and shame. However, we find another reference to Achor much later in the Old Testament: "I will give her her vineyards from there, and the valley of Achor as a door of hope. And she will sing there as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt," (Hosea 2:15). In Joshua, Achor was a place of stealing and judgment; in Hosea, Achor is a door of hope!

Personal Study Question: Do you see the door of hope in this time of worldwide pandemic? Are you living in dread and terror like those in the world who do not know Jesus Christ?

At the end of my sermons online, I included a list of ideas for Daily Use. You may want to write these on an index card and keep it handy, type it into your phone as a reminder each day, or write it in your Bible next to this week's verse. Use these ideas in your own life, but use them also to challenge your brothers and sisters to believe Romans 8:28 in these difficult days!

- Look for the good in the bad in all the trials of your life.
- Thank God for the troubles, and thank Him for this pandemic.
- Ask God for wisdom to see the good from the bad.
- Love God, love your neighbor, and share the gospel in the trials of these days.

Love and peace to you all,
Pastor Mike

Week 1 of Stay at Home
Wednesday – Romans 8:5-6
Setting Your Mind on the Spirit

Dear Church,

Today I'm going to help us to consider the concept of setting our minds on the Spirit and experiencing the life and peace that comes from it. Many of us find ourselves with time on our hands in these days: time often spent driving, working, or other responsibilities are adjusted due to the quarantine and health crisis. Because of this extra time, our minds have the opportunity to think and to process different thoughts that we don't ordinarily indulge.

The virus has led to many circumstances that press the mind to anxiety, worry, and depression. Many today are sitting at home with tortured minds filled with agitation. And with the constant updates and bad news from the worldwide pandemic, it seems we can't get away from it. However, the good from the bad in these days allows believers to determine that **we can set our mind on the Spirit** rather than the trouble around us. It's this kind of thinking that reminds us that God is working all things for good (Romans 8:28). And when our minds are on the Spirit, we know His life and peace.

Many today are practicing worldly thinking. Actually, many have always practiced worldly thinking, but it's more evident in these anxiety-filled times. But let's consider these words:

“For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.” (Romans 8:5-6)

When we set our minds on something temporal, we practice worldly thinking; it is an obsessed, focused way of thinking. Worldly-thinking minds are focused on fleshly things, as explained in Galatians 5:19-21: “Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these...”

Personal Study Question: Read back through that list from Galatians 5 again; have any of these characteristics marked your own thinking lately?

Believers are called to the opposite of worldly thinking; we are called to practice spiritual thinking. Every Christian has the ability to practice spiritual thinking because we are possessed—or filled with—the Holy Spirit. He lives in us; we have the power to access His thoughts if we so choose. And those who practice spiritual thinking find that their lives reflect those thoughts in their actions: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control,” (Galatians 5:22-23).

Spiritual thinking is not just the focus of our minds; it also turns our hearts and our attitudes toward the Lord and is outwardly lived. This kind spiritual thinking—which is both inward and outward—brings us life and peace. Oh, consider what a life-giving blessing we receive from spiritual thinking: hope, joy, confidence, and peace in the midst of every storm. Those who set their minds on the Spirit experience peace. You see, Spiritual thinking is peace-giving, and isn't our world today desperate for peace? David puts this peace-filled, Spirit-focused life into beautiful words for us: "You have put gladness in my heart, more than when their grain and new wine abound. In peace I will both lie down and sleep, for You alone, O Lord, make me to dwell in safety," (Psalm 4:7-8). David lived in difficult times: he had many enemies, he struggled with wars and children who killed one another and even had a son who tried to kill him. Yet He voiced the confidence and peace found in the person who is focused on the things of God.

So, what can we remember as we focus on spiritual thinking this week?

- The believer must choose to practice spiritual thinking. It's not going to simply happen *to us*; we must choose to *set* our minds on the things above, not on the things that are on earth (see Colossians 3:2). The distracted mind is set on worry, fear, anger, and selfishness. The disciplined mind is intentionally set on the Spirit and the spiritual things God points us to.
- The pattern of your thinking results in the pattern of your living. Paul gives a wonderful list for us in Philippians 4:8, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things." The Greek word translated "dwell" means to calculate or consider carefully. We take care to point our minds toward the things of God.
- Practicing spiritual thinking is essential for life and peace in Jesus Christ. If we don't guide our thoughts to the Spirit, they will instead be on the things of the world. And worldly thinking offers us no peace.
- Peace comes not from our environment, but from the way we think. Just look at the two men whose words we've studied today: David and Paul. These two had more difficulties than we can even imagine, and they spoke over and over about the peace God gives. They understood the practice and the value of Spirit-focused thinking.
- The pressured mind will fret, fear, and worry. It's almost like anxiety is our default setting. We must be intentional in the focus and faith of our thinking.
- The thoughts that you allow to remain in your mind will either hurt you or bless you. Thoughts are never inert; they pull us toward or away from peace as they pull us toward or away from the Spirit. Throughout every day, we have many thoughts—worldly and spiritual—that rush through our minds; the question we ask ourselves is this: what thoughts are remaining in my mind? What thoughts are bringing me life and peace? Am I dwelling on those?

I've used the word "*practice*" several times in my words to you today. We're not going to make up our minds to be spiritual thinkers; we've got to practice! Just like practicing a sport or a craft

or a skill, it takes time and repetition to develop our spiritual thinking. So use these ideas for daily use over the coming days as you practice setting your own mind on the things of the Spirit:

- Make it your daily practice to set your mind on spiritual things.
- Maintain spiritual mindedness all day long.
- Think like the Lord Jesus would think and how He would desire for you to think.
- Think about the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ (see 2 Corinthians 3:18)
- Think about the Lord's death, resurrection, ascension, reign, and return.
- Think about heaven and eternal life.

I pray that your practicing of spiritual thinking will not only transform your attitude and your own faith but will spill over into your relationships. How wonderful to bless our friends, family, and even strangers with the life-giving peace that comes from a mind focused on the Spirit.

May the Lord bless you,
Pastor Mike

Week 2 of Stay at Home
Sunday – Psalm 27:14
Wait on the Lord

Dear Church,

What are you waiting for in these days of pandemic? Are you waiting for a cure, a vaccine, or some assurance that you are safe? Are you waiting for all businesses to return to “normal?” Are you waiting for God to help you fight through your anxiety and uncertainty? Are you just waiting this out as if it is simply another accidental occurrence? Are you waiting on God’s provision and purposes to be accomplished in these days? We’re all learning to wait as we stay home and have our schedules upended by the new normal in our virus-changed world. So today we’ll consider this truth from Scripture: **believers wait on the Lord** in times of troubles.

“Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; yes, wait for the Lord.” (Psalm 27:14)

The first thing we should notice is that the phrase, **“wait for the Lord” is a *command***. It’s not a suggestion or a good idea. The Hebrew word for *wait* comes from a word that means “to twist together.” Like a rope tightly twisted together and wrapped around an object, this is the picture of waiting on the Lord. You may want to consider the mental image of tying ourselves to the Lord with that rope. Like a boat’s rope tied to the anchor, God is holding us in place in the midst of the waves of the sea. Another way to think of this word *wait* can be “a strong expectation” on the Lord.

Personal Study Question: What strong expectation do you have in the Lord these days?

God’s people must wait on the Lord in our life experiences. Many of us have learned this important spiritual lesson in our pasts; some of us need to re-learn it as we’ve become accustomed to dictating the direction and flow of our lives. Waiting on God is crucial to seeing that God causes all things to work together for good (Romans 8:28). Some believers are just now having the chance to learn to wait on the lord in this time of trouble and despair. Regardless of your age or season of life, the command is there: wait on the Lord.

There are good reasons for waiting on the Lord: “Be strong and let your heart take courage.” *Waiting for the Lord gives strength*. We are stronger when we wait on the Lord, even if we feel we are weak and can’t wait any longer. Isaiah promises us, “those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary,” (40:31).

Waiting for the Lord also gives us courage to face the uncertainties of life and the times in which we live. We often lose courage when we trust in the things of men and the material world. But when we wait on the Lord, our courage rises! Consider the following testimonies found in the Scriptures:

- “And now, Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in You,” (Psalm 39:7).
- “For from days of old they have not heard or perceived by ear, nor has the eye seen a God besides You, who acts in behalf of the one who waits for Him,” (Isaiah 64:4).
- “Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go,” (Joshua 1:7).

Just as we considered the practice of spiritual thinking, so we must also **practice waiting on the Lord**. We wait for God’s purposes to be accomplished in the world. In times like these, we discover how selfish we are about our lives and our priorities. We are waiting to get back to our plans. But God is doing something bigger than any of our plans! *These days teach us that God has interrupted man’s plans and dreams to do His work for His purposes which are beyond us and greater than us!* You’ll remember the words of Romans 8:28, “we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” Waiting teaches us to remember that God’s interruptions are for our good; we should celebrate when He steps into our lives and creates even chaos and confusion because we know He is working for our good and His glory.

What are some of the things we are waiting for God to do in these days?

1. **To finish His work of making us holy children of God.** Philippians 2:13 says, “for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”
2. **To allow all to be saved who will come to the Lord Jesus before He returns to this world.** Peter reminded believers that when the critics asked why the Lord had not returned, “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance,” (2 Peter 3:9). The Lord isn’t slow; He’s patient! In these days of pandemic, He calls for people to come and be saved. The Lord cries out today in these times of plague and virus, “Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other,” (Isaiah 45:22).
3. **To complete His purposes in the world by preparing the world for the soon return of the Lord Jesus Christ to this world.** Isaiah declared the word of the Lord concerning these times when he said, “Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘my purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure,’” (Isaiah 46:9-10).
4. **To complete the preparation for God’s people’s place in heaven.** The Lord Jesus promised the disciples in the upper room a promise: “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also,” (John 14:2-3).

Our job is to wait; His job is to work. Waiting can surely mean doing things for the kingdom of God, but often it means growing, trusting, praying, seeking, and believing. Consider the following ideas for daily use as you put into practice your choice to wait on the Lord this week:

- Expectantly trust the Lord in all that comes in your life. “Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?” (Job 2:10)
- Patiently submit to God’s time in His work in the world and in your life. “But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it,” (Romans 8:25).
- Joyfully praise God for His work in the world and in our lives. You can see His handiwork even in these days if you have eyes to see!
- Faithfully pray to God to know and do His will while He works in the world and in your life.
- Enduringly watch for the Lord’s return and our final salvation. Paul reminds us, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,” (Philippians 3:20).

Choose to wait. Practice waiting. Let the waiting strengthen your heart, your soul, your faith, and your mind. Know the strength we are promised when we choose to wait on the Lord.

Waiting with you,
Pastor Mike.

Week 2 of Stay at Home
Wednesday – Psalm 116:7
Rest in the Lord

Dear Church,

Would you describe these days as restful days? Are you finding yourself agitated and unable to relax? Was there a period of your life that you look back on and think of how restful it was? It's a wonderful truth—the Good from the Bad—that even in bad times God will give His people a restful calmness in their troubles. God's rest is proof that He is causing all things to work together for good for those who love God (Romans 8:28). We won't find rest in our world or in a cure for viruses or in stable finances; no, **believers must find their rest in God alone.**

Psalm 116 is a song of thanks for God's deliverance. The unnamed psalmist thanks God for many things in this psalm: He heard his voice, He listened, He rescued him, and more. And we see in the psalm that God did all these things in the midst of a terrible time for the writer. We understand that the psalmist is looking back on that hard time and seeing all the ways God was with him. We can find ourselves in this example: in the future, we will look back and have the opportunity to thank God for His care for us in these days of pandemic, when so many are experiencing dread and sheer terror.

As we look closely at Psalm 116:7, we find the example for our own lives that show us how to find rest in these hard days.

“Return to your rest, O my soul, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you,” (Psalm 116:7)

First, a word of self-encouragement. The psalmist had already reminded himself of God's grace in listening (“I love the Lord, because He hears my voice and my supplications,” Psalm 116:1). He had also reminded himself of the near-death experiences of the past (“the cords of death encompassed me and the terrors of Sheol came upon me; I found distress and sorrow,” Psalm 116:3). Just as the psalmist was gripped by fear, so our world is gripped by the cords of death in this time of virus; they can't see it or stop it. They live in distress and sorrow.

So when we find ourselves gripped by fear, we follow the example of the psalmist: we tell our souls to rest. The Hebrew word translated “rest” means to be silent or still. Stillness and silence are things that God gives to us when we experience rest in Him.

Most people live in continual restlessness, and did so even before our current pandemic. There are many examples of restlessness in God's word:

- Job said, “I am not at ease, nor am I quiet, and I am not at rest, but turmoil comes,” (Job 3:26).
- Solomon described the common condition of restlessness in the world when he wrote, “...all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest,” (Ecclesiastes 2:23)

We see in these two verses that restlessness can include terror, distress, sorrow, turmoil, grief, and the inability to sleep. Do these behaviors describe your life today? Then you are not experiencing the rest offered to us in God, for those who trust in the Lord, rest in the Lord is available at all times.

Secondly, we need a self-reminder of God's great care in the past and the present. Why was the psalmist able to rest, according to Psalm 116:7? Because the Lord had dealt bountifully with him. We might picture the psalmist considering the difficulties he had encountered in the past and how God was with him over and over. He gives us a record: in verse 4 he wrote, "Then I called upon the name of the Lord: 'O Lord, I beseech You, save my life!" and he recorded the response of God in verse 6: "The Lord preserves the simple; I was brought low, and He saved me." The psalmist took the time to reset his mind: he remembered the experience of calling on God and that He saved him from his low condition.

Restlessness is turned to restfulness in God when the psalmist focuses on God's care in the past. Today, we can pause and tell ourselves, "Return to your rest, O my soul, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you."

Personal Study Question: In what three areas are you finding restlessness today? What scripture(s) speak to God's rest in those areas?

So how can we remember to find rest in the Lord? Consider these lasting truths:

- Believers must learn the habit of talking to themselves about their spiritual condition. David had written, "Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him for the help of His presence," (Psalm 42:5).
- The Lord Jesus promises rest when we come to Him. He promised, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me...and you will find rest for your souls," (Matthew 11:28-29). Oh, how we need rest for our souls not only in these days but every day! It comes only as we trust in the Lord Jesus in every situation of our lives.
- There is a promised eternal rest in heaven for God's people! We see the promises of rest in Hebrews 4:9, which says, "so there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God." And John heard an eternal promise from a voice in heaven declaring, "I heard a voice from heaven, saying...they may rest from their labors," (Revelation 14:13). Oh, the wonderful promise of resting in Jesus on earth until we are at perfect rest in Him in heaven!
- Resting in the Lord means having a calmed and quieted mind. David wrote in Psalm 131:2, "Surely I have composed and quieted my soul; like a weaned child rests against his mother, my soul is like a weaned child within me." Watching a baby resting on her mother, full of confidence and assurance, is such a sweet sight! It is the picture of a believer resting in the Lord. There is safety, support, and care from God so that the mind of the believer is calm like a comforted, satisfied baby.

I hope you're practicing the spiritual habits of waiting on the Lord and thinking spiritual thoughts. In the same way, we can practice waiting on the Lord!

- Never forget the benefits and blessings God has given you in the past. Further on in Psalm 116, we read, "What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits toward me? I shall lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord," (vv. 12-13). This is what we do to rest in the Lord: we remember His benefits to us and continue to depend on Him. Lift the cup of salvation by speaking aloud all He has done for you! Call on the name of the Lord.
- Think about and thank God for His benefits and blessings to you. Consider these additional verses from Psalm 116: "I shall pay my vows to the Lord, oh may it be in the presence of all his people," (v. 14) and "To You I shall offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and call upon the name of the Lord," (v. 17). Pause and spend time in quiet reflection to think about what God has done for you and then intentionally thank Him for each item. Offer the sacrifice of praise and ask God for more of His grace and mercy. Fill you mind with truth about God's wonderful care.
- Draw near in prayer by faith to the throne of grace; there you will find mercy to help you in your time of need. The Lord Jesus calls us to come to Him, so we live by faith in Him in these troubled days. Go to Him with your terrorized, worried mind and He will give you His peace. His peace is a quiet calmness in all the circumstances of life. We are invited to join the apostle in the blessings of drawing near to God: "Therefore, let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace in time of need," (Hebrews 4:16).

Oh, church, how we need to enter the rest of the Lord in these days, not only for ourselves but for our families, for building up our brothers and sisters, and for pointing those who do not know Jesus toward the only source of rest. I pray you rest in the Lord, find that He has dealt bountiful with you, and walk confidently in that rest this week.

Praying always for you,
Pastor Mike

Week 3 of Stay at Home
Sunday – Isaiah 40:28-31
Gaining New Strength

Dear Church,

Have you seen the exhaustion in people as we enter yet another week of quarantine and isolation? I bet you've seen it; you may have even felt it. During these days, many are showing signs of mental exhaustion. There are those all around us today who are giving up, living in despair, and living in hopelessness. Are you *losing* your strength during these days? Or are you *renewing* your strength?

Believers can gain new strength, regardless of their circumstances. I want to remind you of the great truths of Isaiah 40. We've already looked into waiting for the Lord, but we must not miss the instruction to have renewed strength in God as we wait on Him!

“Do you not know? Have you not heard?

The Everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth

Does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable.

He gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power.

Though youths grow weary and tired, and vigorous young men stumble badly,

Yet those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength;

They will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired,

They will walk and not become weary.”

(Isaiah 40:28-31)

Personal Study Question: If you had to choose one line from the Isaiah 40 passage above as your focus for today, what would it be? Why?

What a powerful, uplifting, energizing passage from the prophet Isaiah. We see the truth of Romans 8:28 reflected here: He's causing all things to work together for good even when we're weary, powerless, tired, and stumbling! Let me make a few observations about the truths found in these words:

Believers can live in the renewing strength of God. “He gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power,” (Isaiah 40:29). What great words of encouragement to all who put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ! Our God is the strengthener and source of power for His people. In every situation in these days of the bad, we have the promise of God's sustaining power for those who lack the stamina to continue. We see this promise of strength in the next chapter of Isaiah: “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand,” (41:10).

God's power is the source of all power. "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable," (Isaiah 40:28). Here we are reminded of our tireless God who never runs out of strength. He is the eternally powerful One who reigns in power. The Lord Jesus Christ holds all things together by the word of His power (see Colossians 1:17). God's power is complete and absolute. *Nothing* can stop the powerful work and ways of God. The psalmist said, "...our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases," (Psalm 115:3). Today, let's remember that our God is the God who spoke the word and all creation into existence. That same power is still at work in our world today: abiding, enduring, and available.

God's power is permanent power. God does not become weary or tired. My friends, *our God never sleeps and never grows tired* in His work in our lives and in the world. We live in the permanent power of God! The Lord Jesus said, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working," (John 5:17). He continues His work from day to day and from generation to generation.

Those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength (Isaiah 40:31). Today, in these times of waiting and worrying, we can find confidence in the promise that we can gain new strength. **New strength!** Not the strength from yesterday but the strength for today. Paul understood the renewing strength of God in his life: he prayed for the church at Ephesus, that they would discover the renewable power of God in their lives. He also prayed that they would understand the exceeding greatness of God's power to us who believer, according to the working of His mighty power, which He brought about in Christ (see Ephesians 1:19-20). The power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead is the renewing power of God, given to those who trust in Jesus Christ.

If you haven't already committed Isaiah 40:31 to memory, may I challenge you to do that in the coming days? Perhaps you can write it out and put it up in a prominent place so that all your household can dwell on these words and find strength in the Lord through His promises. As these words take hold in your heart, I would hope you remember:

- **As we gain new strength for each day, we can pass through all the troubles of life.** This time of pandemic is not the last bit of trouble that will come into our lives. But renewed strength will come for each of those trials as we wait for the Lord.
- **As we gain new strength, we can face the uncertainty of our troubles.** The power of worry is overwhelming to many people, but the power of renewed strength raises us out of our worry and sets us on the firm foundation of our faith in Jesus.
- **As we gain new strength, we learn to live on renewing strength from God.** Paul said it best: "when I am weak, then I am strong," (2 Corinthians 12:10). My weakness brings the power of God to my life as I trust and wait on the Lord.
- **Gaining new strength comes while we are waiting in faith on the Lord as He works in our lives and accomplishes His purposes in the world.** Job said, "All the days of my struggle I will wait until my change comes," (Job 14:14). He understood the secret of waiting on the Lord by faith: wait for the change to come, regardless of how many days that takes.

- **Measure your times of struggle in days, not in years.** Job called his troubled time “days” not “years,” (Job 14:14). While we wait in these days of temporary trials, we compare them to the eternal day of eternity: no more trouble, trials, or pain! This brings renewed strength to the mind as well as the heart.

God’s all-powerful, unceasing, immeasurable strength is enough to make us bow in worship. But the fact that He shares that strength with us should make us fall to our knees. How great is our God, who shares His strength with us as we wait on Him!

This week, let’s focus on the truth of who God is and how His strength is available to us:

- “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful,” (Hebrews 10:23). Focus on who God is and His faithfulness!
- God acts on behalf of the one who waits for Him (see Isaiah 64:4). Though you can’t see it, He is preparing you for glory in these trials and temporary troubles.
- As we fight the good fight, finish our course, and keep the faith, we can be confident that God will acknowledge our struggle and increase our glory in the final days (see 2 Timothy 4:8).
- Together let’s echo the words of Paul from Philippians 4:13: “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”

Don’t depend on your own strength; it is limited, inconsistent, and human. Instead, receive the strength you need from the Lord, putting your life and your thoughts and your heart in His hands. He is with us, church. He is our strength.

Praying you find strength in the Lord,
Pastor Mike

Week 3 of Stay at Home
Wednesday – Hebrews 10:36 and 12:1-3
Gaining Endurance

Dear Church,

What comes to mind when you think of the word *endurance*? Perhaps you picture an endurance athlete, such as a cyclist or a runner, competing in a long race. Maybe you think of someone you know who is going through a difficult time, such as an extended illness, financial hardship, or taking care of a loved one. You may even think of your own family right now, enduring the strain of this pandemic and dealing with all the hardships that come with it.

Endurance in trials is necessary to do God's will and follow the Lord Jesus Christ's example. If we're going to believe that God is causing all things to work together for good (see Romans 8:28), **believers must gain endurance**. Consider the following passages:

"Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart," (Hebrews 12:1-3)

"For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised," (Hebrews 10:36)

Personal Study Questions: What sin entangles you and keeps you from running the race?

Let's consider first **the need for endurance**. Followers of Jesus have endured many things for being Christians. For the 2000-plus years that people have dared to follow Him, they have known persecution, ridicule, hatred, and even death. And though we don't face those types of hardships daily in Dickson, Tennessee, you must consider that loss will come to our lives. We are not exempt from pain and hardships just because we are Christians; on the contrary, we may experience more difficulties because of our faith. But as we look through Scripture, we see that great conflicts and sufferings were dealt to God's people as far back as Genesis. We should anticipate and expect conflicts in our lives, as well.

When our faith is tested, our endurance is strengthened. Consider the words of James, who said, "...knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance...let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing," (James 1:3-4). Like a runner logging months and months of miles before a marathon, we gain spiritual strength as we keep our eyes on Jesus even in our difficult times.

Our endurance also leads to blessings. James also wrote, “We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord’s dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful,” (5:11). The hard times may not seem like a blessing, but the endurance that comes as a result of our persevering blesses our own lives as well as the lives of those around us.

Next, we must ask a few questions concerning **the duty of endurance**. Did you know you are called to endure? Yes, part of our calling as children of God is to be known as a people who endure through difficulties. Let me get us thinking about this by asking a few questions:

Are you doing the will of God? In John 4:34, Jesus said, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.” Like Jesus, we should thrive on the nutrients of living in obedience to God.

Do you understand what the will of the Lord is? Paul wrote, “So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is,” (Ephesians 5:17). God’s will is for you to be loving, to be holy, to be helpful, to be encouraging, and many more things. Even when you may not know what tomorrow will be, live according to His standards and the example of Jesus.

In Colossians 1:10 we read, “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” It’s our responsibility to please the Lord during this time and in these circumstances, however difficult they may be. Not only that, but “whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father,” (Colossians 3:17). We can thank God as we represent Him in this crazy world.

Lastly, we should keep in mind the **benefits of endurance**. As we endure, we are changing. And in that changing, God is making us more like Christ! Troubles bring endurance, which builds our character: “And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope,” (Romans 5:3-4). Christians endure for the blessings from God, gaining hope along the way (see Hebrews 10:35).

Endurance is more than just making it to the finish line by the skin of your teeth; it includes running a race worthy of respect and finishing strong. In order to train for the endurance of faith, consider these suggestions for daily use:

- Give thanks in all things, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus (see 1 Thessalonians 5:18). Thank God for His presence, His love, His mercy, and His perfect plan. Thank Him for the ugly, the tiresome, the mundane, and the exhausting. Each time you thank Him in faith, your endurance is strengthened.
- Focus on demonstrating patient endurance in all things, which pleases God. Paul wrote, “Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary,” (Galatians 6:9). Ask God to fill your heart as you walk through hard times.

- Think deeply about the endurance of the Lord Jesus Christ. We often talk about His death on the cross, but consider all the other ways in which He endured: He experienced extreme temptation; He knew rejection and deception from His followers; He dealt with hurting and dying and desperate people. Perhaps this is a great time to choose one of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John) to read slowly and pull out those passages in which Jesus endured, praying that you can follow His example.

It's time to build up our endurance, not just for this time of pandemic but for our ongoing life of faith. We need endurance to build up this body of believers, to strengthen our families, and to give encouragement to our communities. Come on! Let's lace up our shoes and get stronger!

Training with you,
Pastor Mike

Week 4 of Stay at Home
Sunday – 2 Timothy 2:8
Jesus Christ is Risen!

Dear Church,

Never in my life would I believe that I would not be able to gather with the church on Easter Sunday, but here we are. I, along with all of you, am unable to gather together on this glorious resurrection Sunday during the pandemic; still, **Jesus Christ is risen from the dead!** He is alive and with us today in our scattered condition. Though I wish we were together to celebrate Jesus on Easter, I am still convinced that God is causing all things to work together for good (Romans 8:28), even if it's not what I want or what I expected.

Paul, at the end of his life, found himself in prison alone and wrote to Timothy, the young preacher, to challenge him with one truth that is our text for today:

“Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead,” (2 Timothy 2:8).

First, we must remember that **Jesus Christ was risen from the dead and abolished the agony of death.** As the faithful women left the scene of the death of Jesus Christ after His death, all they could do is watch the place where they buried the body of the Lord. Then they went and gathered spices and waited to return after the Sabbath to anoint the body of the Lord (see Luke 23:53-56). But when they came on the first day of the week, the grave was empty and the Lord Jesus was alive from the dead.

Peter stood up on the day of Pentecost not many days after Christ's resurrection and preached the first gospel sermon in Acts 2. He declared in that sermon that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, abolishing the agony of death (see Acts 2:24). The Greek word for *agony* is a word describing the pain of a woman giving birth. Many today live in perpetual agony of death; they fear death's universal reach to all people; they fear death's power to take away life. The reports of death from the virus ring in people's ears. They wonder, “Am I going to die, too?” We need to remember Peter's words: “But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power,” (Acts 2:24).

Then we remember that **Jesus Christ was risen from the dead and has all authority and power,** “having exalted to the right hand of God,” (Acts 2:33). Consider that truth: the Lord Jesus is ascended and exalted in heaven! Today, right now, He is living and reigning over all things with complete authority and power. We read in Hebrews 1:3, “He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” The Lord Jesus declared to the disciples, just as He was about to ascend, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth,” (Matthew 28:18). We remember our risen Lord who has all authority and power, even in times of pandemic!

Personal Study Question: In what areas do you doubt Jesus' power and authority in these days? Confess those areas of uncertainty and doubt to Him right now.

We also remember that **Jesus Christ was risen from the dead and is Lord and Christ forever**. Peter expressed this truth in that same Pentecost sermon: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified," (Acts 2:36). The Lord Jesus is now risen as Lord and Christ forever. He will always be our Lord and Christ. Paul also tells the church that "He is the head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything," (Colossians 1:18). Since He is Lord and Christ, He is first in everything in our lives today.

And last, we remember that **Jesus Christ was risen from the dead and is our great high priest**. The writer of Hebrews calls Him our "great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God," (4:14). His presence represents His death; as our mediator, He took our sin on Himself when He died. Not only that, but He also sympathizes with us in these days of trials (Hebrews 4:15). Through the redeeming blood of Jesus, we have a direct line to God the Father and confidence as we enter His presence.

Jesus is Risen! That's not a truth that's valid just on Easter; it can change our every day. As you consider the implications of Jesus Christ risen from the dead, keep in mind:

- There is no need to agonize or worry over death because Jesus Christ has given those who believe in Him eternal life. He has removed the agony and fear of death. All around us are the reports of death from the virus, but for those who know the Lord, we have no need to agonize about death because we can be confident in Him in both life and death (Philippians 1:20-21).
- The Lord reigns over the world in times of pandemic, just as He always has (see Psalm 29:10). **Nothing has changed** from the Lord's view and purposes. All things carry on because He reigns! He reigns over pandemics, pestilence, virus, and death.
- Real life is connected to confessing that Jesus is Lord. He is Lord of the world, Lord of creation, and Lord over the nations.
- Our Lord is our high priest; we come to Him for grace and mercy in our times of need.
- Your life is hidden in Christ. Whether you live or die, you are eternally united to Christ.

I hope you celebrated our risen Lord Jesus with your family on Easter; I hope you reminded your friends and family of His power over the grave and His power to save not just now but forever. But is the truth of Easter living and breathing in your everyday life? Consider some of the following ideas for keeping the hope of Easter alive each and every day:

- Go to your high priest for what you need in these days of fear, dread, and loss (see Hebrews 4:16).
- Stay focused on your risen Lord who reigns over all the affairs of the world (Revelation 1:5). Meditate on scripture, sing worship songs, and create art based on the truths of who He is.

- You are raised with Christ by salvation in Jesus Christ. Keep seeking the things to come and not the things of the world (see Colossians 3:1).
- Confess Him as Lord in the storms that are raging around you today. Have the scriptures from today's letter handy and use them to speak aloud to confront your fears and anxiety.

Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed! Not just on Easter, but every day—now, tomorrow, and all of eternity.

Celebrating Jesus's victory with you,
Pastor Mike

Week 4 of Stay at Home
Wednesday – Philippians 4:11-13
Living in Contentment

Dear Church,

There are many issues we're dealing with in these days of pandemic: fear, joblessness, financial hardship, health challenges, uncertainty, and more. But there's something else you have experienced or witnessed during this time, as well: discontentment. Now don't get me wrong: discontentment is not just an issue during quarantine; it's a struggle even in our normal life!

Believers can live in contentment in all life circumstances. We may say we believe those words, but are living in contentment today? If we're going to choose to live in the truth that God is working all things for good in these days (Romans 8:28), we must be able to identify the discontentment in our lives and root it out.

Why? Because there is great danger in discontentment. Consider the following passages from Psalm 106:

- "We have sinned like our fathers, we have committed iniquity, we have behaved wickedly. Our fathers in Egypt did not understand Your wonders; they did not remember Your abundant kindnesses," (verses 6-7)
- "They quickly forgot His works; they did not wait for His counsel," (verse 13)
- "...they grumbled in their tents; they did not listen to the voice of the Lord," (verse 25)

The Israelites had sinned in that they forgot the Lord's goodness, kindness, and actions on their behalf. Just as God's people sinned in their discontent, we can find ourselves guilty of the same today. Discontent is sinful unbelief, sinful pride, and sinful covetousness.

Personal Study Question: Are you living in sinful discontentment today? Are you focused on the Lord's blessings, goodness, and promises to you?

As Christians, **we must learn to live contented in every life circumstance.** Oh, that we could echo the words of Paul as he wrote to the Philippian church:

"...I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me," (Philippians 4:11-13).

Contentment is independent of external circumstances. Paul was able to testify that he was content in "whatever circumstances I am," because contentment is not controlled by external pleasures. You can be tired and still be content. You can be unemployed and still be content. You can be sick and still be content.

The Bible has much to teach us about contentment:

- Contentment is being silent under afflictions: “I have become mute, I do not open my mouth, because it is You who have done it,” (Psalm 39:9).
- Contentment is cheerful: “Therefore I am well content with weakness, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong,” (2 Corinthians 12:10).
- Contentment is being thankful: “in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus,” (1 Thessalonians 5:18).
- Contentment is having a calm mind in all circumstances: “For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace,” (Romans 8:6).

Followers of Jesus must learn how to live in contentment. Don’t miss that Paul said he had *learned to be content in whatever circumstances* (Philippians 4:11). Contentment isn’t just a disposition or a particular outlook; contentment is learned as we live by faith. Believers learn *by faith* that God permits all circumstances for their good. Believers also learn *by faith* that God provides what they need in all circumstances. As we look to the life of Christ and choose to seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, we find that He has given us exactly what we need.

As we learn to be content, **God blesses us with power to strengthen our contentment.** What a gracious, loving, heavenly Father! Paul wrote in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” We don’t have to summon our own strength to find contentment; God gives us His strength! Hallelujah! Consider just a few:

- I can face uncertain days of trials because Christ is in me.
- I can wait on the Lord to provide because Christ is in me.
- I can learn to live by faith in the power of God in me.

Personal Study Question: Can you write three more statements of faith?

I can _____
 I can _____
 I can _____

I hope you’ve read these words and think, “I want that! I want contentment that comes regardless of my circumstances!” Well, if you are ready to learn contentment, start with a few of these ideas:

- In these days, learn to live by faith in contentment. “But godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment,” (1 Timothy 6:6).
- In these days, rely on the Holy Spirit to give you contentment. “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit,” (Romans 15:13).
- In these days, pray the prayer of contentment: “Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is my portion,” (Proverbs 30:8)

Paul had experienced it all: shipwreck, persecution, rejection, hard travel, difficulties, and more. And yet his testimony is solid: "I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances...I can do everything through Christ." Oh church, this can be our testimony, as well. Learn contentment and find the strength of Christ as you walk in that contentment.

Choosing to be content,
Pastor Mike

Week 5 of Stay at Home
Sunday – Romans 5:3-5
Living in Confident Hope

Dear Church,

You need not dig deeply to find much talk of doom and despair in these days. Many are saying this virus will ruin our economy; many speculate that it will cause untold death worldwide. Without a vaccine or a cure, we may think that this situation is hopeless. But hopelessness does not exist in God's Kingdom; we are never without hope because we serve the God of all hope. **Believers can live in confident hope in all life circumstances.** Consider Paul's words:

“And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us,” (Romans 5:3-5)

There are two mindsets we can take: Christian hopefulness or worldly hopelessness. Christian hopefulness is believing the truth of Romans 8:28, that God is working all things for good; because of that faith in God, the believer is hopeful because he trusts in an Almighty God. Christian hopefulness purifies, sanctifies, and saves us because hopefulness is an extension of our faith. Hopefulness chooses to exult, or boast or rejoice, even in troubles. The world may think such hopefulness is crazy, but our hope is based on an expectation and anticipation that God will do what He has promised. Hope is looking forward to the future, even when we don't know what the future will look like.

Worldly hopelessness, on the other hand, has nothing powerful to trust in. Worldly hopelessness carries feelings of loneliness, exclusion, despair, and loss. Perhaps you've read that suicide hotline calls have risen dramatically in the past month; that's because things that people once hoped in have proven to be unfaithful. We've all had our moments of hopelessness; consider what Paul said in Ephesians 2:12: “remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” Oh, church, when our faith is in anything other than the Living God, we can feel hopelessness in any situation.

Personal Study Question: Consider your own past: besides Jesus, what have you put your hope in? How are you guarding against putting your hope in the things of this world today?

But we—Christians—can hope because we are children of God in the midst of a hopeless generation! (See Philippians 2:15) I pray today that you can exhibit the characteristics of hopefulness in your own life. Here is a brief description of them:

Hope boasts with certainty in our eternal glory. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead, has ascended to heaven, and is currently there interceding for us! Even if we had nothing else to

place our hope in, that fact alone should fill us with hope because we know our Savior is speaking on our behalf to the Father. Our lives are hidden with God, entrusted to His perfect plan in His Kingdom. On top of that, we are blessed with all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places (see Ephesians 1:3). My friends, you have access to all that God has ordained you to be: blessed, chosen, adopted, accepted, redeemed, forgiven, and more. Choose to believe the truth of your identity and live in the hope that comes from it!

Hope boasts with certainty in trials. Like Paul encouraged the Romans to exult in our tribulations, we can do the same. We know that tribulation brings endurance. We know that endurance brings proven character, and we know that proven character brings hope. Without the tribulation, we may never know the endurance and proven character that leads us to hope. Let your prayers reflect these promises today: “Lord, I know you have a plan to give me endurance and proven character in these difficulties.”

Hope boasts with certainty without disappointment. Romans 5:5 said it plainly, “...hope does not disappoint.” Hopefulness keeps us from despair, it keeps us from disappointments, and has no uncertainty. Hope is confident expectation in God and His promises. Yes, we will know difficulty. Yes, there are hard days ahead. But we serve and follow and believe in a mighty God! He can be trusted with our hope for tomorrow.

Hope boasts with certainty that God’s love possesses us. When we come to know Jesus, we are given the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of our faith (see 2 Corinthians 1:22). And it’s through the Holy Spirit that we come to know the love of God deep within our soul. God’s eternal love for us strengthens us, never ends, and never disappoints. And when we live in the faith and knowledge of the love of God inside us, we can echo with John, “See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us,” (1 John 3:1).

Colossians 1:27 explains that God willed to make known His riches and glory among the world when others see “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Oh, church, our responsibility in these days is to pour out our hope toward others so that they may see the glory of God. Here are a few truths we can start to reveal as we share the hope we have in Jesus:

- When Christ is in us, we have the hope of glory regardless of our trials.
- When Christ is in us, we have the hope of salvation regardless of the hopelessness of the world.
- When Christ is in us, we have the hope in His eternal love for us regardless of the disappointments of the world.

Don’t hide your hope! When people around you start to speak in hopelessness, choose to speak the truth: God is bringing good from the bad. When others say, “Where is God in all this mess?” tell them: “The Lord sat as King at the flood; Yes, the Lord sits as King forever,” (Psalm 29:10). The Lord God is still on His throne, and we can hope in Him today and forever.

Walking in hope,
Pastor Mike

Week 5 of Stay at Home
Wednesday - Peter 1:6-9

Faith During Trials

Dear Church,

How is your faith today? Would you say that your faith is strong, alive, and growing? Or perhaps you might say that your faith is weak, faltering, or questionable. Before we get into today's Scripture, consider your own answers to the following questions:

Personal Study Questions: Do you believe that God is with you? Do you believe that God will be with you? Do you trust in the Lord Jesus as your Lord and Savior? Do you believe that the Lord knows what is best for you in these hard days?

I challenge you to answer these questions honestly; if your faith is not where you want it to be, today's truth will bring you encouragement: **Trials test the genuineness of our faith.** Just like a pop quiz in school, the testing that comes from trials gives us an accurate score of our faith. Perhaps you won't like the grade received from those tests of faith; you thought you had greater faith than you proved in the test. However, Jesus is there to give us stronger, more vibrant faith even in trials. Just as we've considered many times, trials that reveal our faith level are actually God's plan to work all things for good (Romans 8:28).

We need to know the honest answer to this question: **Are you living by faith or in unbelief?** Trials reveal our faith, and we are wise to consider what our faith looks like under fire. Consider Matthew 9: Jesus was walking and two blind men were following Him, crying out for mercy. Jesus asked them plainly, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" (9:27-28). I pray that today's lesson will help us look at our own lives and see the answer.

Peter helps us understand the testing of our faith:

"In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ," (1 Peter 1:6-7).

Genuine faith provides God's permanent protection until we get to heaven. In the verse before our focal passage, Peter wrote that we "are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time," (1 Peter 1:5). The Lord Jesus guards those who put their faith in Him (see John 17:12). We see the same promise in Psalm 31:23, "The Lord preserves the faithful and fully recompenses the proud doer," and Psalm 40:11, "You, O Lord, will not withhold Your compassion from me; Your lovingkindness and Your truth will continually preserve me."

Personal Study Question: Do you believe today that the Lord is your protection?

Genuine faith is tested by the fires of trials. We need not fear trials; God uses the trials to let us know if our faith is genuine. If a trial brings fear or dread, it has revealed a lack of faith. If a trial brings renewed strength and dependence on God, it reveals a faith rooted in Jesus. From traffic congestion to health issues to pandemics and all other trials, we can believe firmly that God is in control and that every trial will produce endurance (see James 1:3).

Genuine faith is never contained inside our belief system; it always affects our outward lives through our actions, words, and attitude. The lifestyle of a person living by genuine faith includes all the ideas we've been discussing during these days of the COVID-19 virus: We believe that God is at work; we wait on the Lord; we rest in the Lord; we love and trust in the living Lord Jesus Christ. Genuine faith is faithful faith in the Lord Jesus in all situations.

Genuine faith will be praised by God when we get to heaven. Our genuine faith results in praise and glory and honor as we reveal Jesus to the world around us (see 1 Peter 1:7). Our faith will be evident when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). But even while we walk this earth, our genuine faith, exhibited during trial, will bring glory to our Lord. It even changes our outlook: "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison," (2 Corinthians 4:17). In light of eternity, we are able to endure with genuine faith until we hear our Lord Jesus say, "Well done, good and faithful servant.... Share in your master's joy," (Matthew 25:23, CSB).

Genuine faith's reward is eternal salvation. Peter goes on to say that, "though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls," (1 Peter 1:9). The beauty of genuine faith in Jesus is that we're not working on obtaining the ultimate goal of faith, which is eternal life with the Lord; we already have that! We are simply walking through this world until we receive it at the end of our lives. Your reward is promised and guaranteed. Salvation in Jesus Christ is complete, eternal, and secure. Glory!

Now that we've looked at the descriptions of genuine faith, I ask you to analyze yourself in this time of trial and testing and honestly answer: Are you trusting God today or are you living in unbelief? Take this question before the Lord Jesus in your personal worship time, allowing the Holy Spirit to reveal His thoughts to you as you ponder the Scriptures I've given you today. Perhaps you may even want to ask a close brother or sister in the Lord to pray for your faith in trials, inviting them to speak truth to your fears and the places where you struggle to believe.

I leave you with this verse today, challenging you as my church family as well as my own heart and faith with these bold words of faith: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight," (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Let's ace this test!

Pastor Mike

Week 6 of Stay at Home

Sunday – Hebrews 11:5-6
Pleasing God

Dear Church,

For many of us these days, our homes are much more crowded. More and more adults are working from home, schools have been closed to avoid spreading the virus, and even child care centers have been closed. We love our families, but we are all working harder these days to keep family peace when there is more family living together more hours of the day. Even with the best of efforts, it's hard to please everyone. Between choosing what to watch on television, picking up after yourself, deciding on meals, and having time alone, pleasing everyone is almost impossible. May the Lord Jesus show us all our own selfishness and peculiarities in these days as He continues to work all things for good (Romans 8:28); may He strengthen our families and teach us how to love, be patient, and help one another.

Pleasing everyone at all times is impossible. When it comes to pleasing God, though, the Bible is very clear: **believers can only please God when they walk by faith**. In today's lesson, we'll consider what that means and how we can walk by faith in all our days. Today's focal scripture points to a man named Enoch:

"Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him," (Genesis 5:24).

We don't actually know much about this man Enoch; his entire biography in Genesis 5 spans only four verses (21-24). But we do know that Enoch walked with God in ungodly times. These were the years before Noah, when corrupt ungodliness was found throughout the hearts of men. God was forgotten by almost all, yet **Enoch walked with God living by faith**.

What does it mean to walk with God? There are a few ways to understand it:

- Walking with God is fellowship with God. We know Him, we communicate with Him, and we develop a relationship with Him throughout our lives.
- Walking with God is the pursuit of God. He is our biggest priority and our most important focus. We're never satisfied with our relationship, but seek to know Him better and more fully.
- Walking with God is a lifelong relationship with God. It's not just for the old or just for the young; it's perfect for each of us at every stage of life.

Enoch walked with God for 350 years (see Genesis 5:22). We might also say that Enoch lived by faith for 350 years, since walking with God means living by faith in God.

Personal Study Question: Are you walking by faith in God? How does your relationship with God shape your days?

Though Enoch's story doesn't take up many words in the Old Testament, his life had a definite impact on the New Testament writers. In Hebrews 11, known to many as the "Faith Hall of Fame," Enoch's story is retold:

“By faith Enoch was taken up so that he could not see death; and he was not found because God took him up; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God,” (Hebrews 11:5).

We already knew that Enoch walked with God; we see here that **Enoch pleased God by living by faith**. As servants and children of the living God, we should always seek to please Him. And God has not kept hidden from us what it takes to please Him; consider:

- “I always do the things that are pleasing to Him,” (John 8:29, words of Jesus)
- “...walk as children of Light...trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord,” (Ephesians 5:9-10)
- “...whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight,” (1 John 3:22)

We please the Lord, as Enoch did, when we do the will of the Lord. It takes faith to walk in obedience, but it is our faith that pleases the Lord.

We can see in both the Genesis and the Hebrews passage that **Enoch was rewarded by God for living by faith: He never died!** God took Enoch to heaven without death because of His faith. Oh church, living by faith is never easy. It requires sacrifice and choosing to pick up our cross to follow Jesus. But we can be confident that God doesn't miss any act of faith we live out for His glory. Just as He observed and rewarded Enoch's faith, so He will ours. Asaph knew this truth; he wrote in Psalm 73:24, “With your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory.” David echoed the same truth in Psalm 16:11, “You will make known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever.” Our ultimate reward of living by faith is the joyful reward of being in God's presence forever. Enoch's life of faith focused on the unseen God and therefore he experienced the unseen joys of His presence.

Just as it was true for Enoch, so it is true for us today: **Pleasing God is living by faith.**

Immediately following the summary of Enoch's life in Hebrews 11, we find these precious words: “And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him,” (Hebrews 11:6). Oh, my friends, we please God by our faith:

- A life of faith is believing that God is here.
- A life of faith is believing that God has given salvation in Jesus Christ.
- A life of faith is seeking God in a deeper relationship daily.

God is pleased **only** with those who live by faith. It encompasses our thoughts, our attitudes, our confession, our repentance, our actions, our forgiveness, our generosity, and on and on. When we walk with God as Enoch did, we please Him by our faith.

Personal Study Question: Today, are you living by faith or just trusting in fate?

As I close today, let's consider one more passage on walking by faith:

“for we walk by faith, not by sight,” (2 Corinthians 5:7)

The Amplified Bible Classic Edition translates it like this: “for we walk by faith [we regulate our lives and conduct ourselves by our conviction or belief respecting man's relationship to God and divine things, with trust and holy fervor, thus we walk], not by sight or appearance.” Living by faith is much more than believing that God exists:

- Living by faith is walking by faith in all life circumstances.
- Living by faith is knowing we have eternal life (see 2 Corinthians 5:1).
- Living by faith is growing stronger in our love for God (see 1 Peter 1:8).
- Living by faith is walking like Jesus walked (see 1 John 2:6).

I ask you to apply today's lesson by going on a solitary walk, either today or in the next few days, as time and weather permit. As you walk, talk to the Lord: ask Him to reveal areas in your walk of faith that are lacking or missing. Ask Him to let you see the areas in which your faith is shining for all to see. Ask Him to walk with you in your relationships, your fears, your struggles, and your victories. Thank Him for giving you faith and strength to follow Him.

Praying for your walk of faith,
Pastor Mike

Week 6 of Stay at Home
Wednesday – Ephesians 6:16-17
Protecting Faith

Dear Church,

We've heard the messages from all kinds of healthcare and governmental agencies: wash your hands, wear a mask, deep clean often-touched surfaces, don't visit sick people, take your temperature, and more. There are many precautions and things to do or not do in order to protect ourselves from the novel coronavirus. But today we're going to focus on a different type of protection: preparing for our spiritual battle against the devil and wickedness.

You've seen drawings of a Roman soldier; picture one with me now: He is strong, bold, and ready for battle. He's wearing armor from head to toe: strong armor to defend him from his enemy. He's holding a weapon as well as a shield. He's been trained for this for years and is confident he will be victorious. Can you see him clearly in your mind's eye? We're going to consider our own armor today, considering the focal truth that **justifying faith protects the believer in overcoming the devil.**

Let's look at today's focal scripture:

"...taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.... take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God," (Ephesians 6:16-17).

First, we **take up our shield of faith.** Faith is not only necessary for salvation; it also provides us with protection. Consider John's words: "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith," (1 John 5:4). Justifying faith in Jesus is our shield of faith, and we rest in the fact that Christ died for us. Not only that, but justifying faith saves us from the penalty, power, and presence of sin, removing our condemnation from the law and the devil. Let me restate that: justifying faith is the **greatest** weapon against the devil and is the **essential** weapon against the devil. We must take up our shield of believing what Christ says about us: we are His forever!

Let me insert here: we take up our shield of faith, but that's not the first battle gear we don. Ephesians 6 also insists that we must put on the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the gospel, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit. So, faith isn't out there fighting alone; we're protected also by things we believe, God's Word, and the way we live. Still, the shield would be the item that would bear the house or lineage to which that warrior belongs: our shield says we are justified by Christ and we are His!

We don't only take up our shield; we also **rely on our shield of faith for protection against the devil.** According to Ephesians 6:16, our shield of faith is able to extinguish ALL the flaming arrows of the evil one: the arrows of temptation, doubt, accusation, worldly compromise, or

whatever arrow he may try to send your way today. The shield of faith is also a full-body protection for the believer: from head to toe, the shield is there to protect you from whatever may assail you. When we rely on our faith in God, we are protected from the devil and all kinds of wickedness.

Let's look at a few words from David, a master warrior and shield-carrying expert:

- "For it is You who blesses the righteous man, O Lord, You surround him with favor as a shield," (Psalm 5:12).
- "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God," (Psalm 20:7).

Lastly, **we raise our shields of faith in our spiritual battles**. Oh, my friends, I hope you will take some time today to open God's Word and look deeply into Ephesians 6:10-18, considering the current state of your armor and asking the Lord to reveal where you may be weak or lacking. We are in a battle, and the devil is seeking to ruin our relationship with Jesus as well as our relationship with people. He fights dirty, and he isn't going to wait until you are ready. He may attack at any time, so we must be prepared.

Believers who raise their shields of faith in God will be ready! We will be able to stand against the schemes of the devil, able to resist him in the evil day, and able to extinguish the flaming darts of the evil one.

So what are a few things we can be doing now to prepare for the battle we're in or the battle that is to come?

- We must raise the shield of faith by praying in faith: "...all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive," (Matthew 21:22).
- We must raise the shield of faith by expecting God to act in faith: "But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind," (James 1:6).
- We must raise the shield of faith by enduring in our faith: "obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls," (1 Peter 1:9).

I'm praying for us this week, that we rely on our faith to protect us and that we find our faith strengthened as we prepare for battle. The Lord is our shield, church (see Psalm 18:2). Hold tight to Him and trust Him for the outcome.

Expecting the victory,
Pastor Mike

Week 7 of Stay at Home
Sunday – Psalm 44:17-18
Faithfulness in Trials

Dear Church,

The virus gripping our world today is affecting people differently. Some are finding their lives threatened, and many people around the world have lost their lives to the virus. Some are isolated from friends and loved ones, leaving them feeling insecure and alone. Others are finding themselves financially strained due to lost jobs or cut wages. On the other hand, some people are merely inconvenienced; they can't go to their favorite restaurants or stores. It's hard to hold to faith and believe that God is working all things for good (see Romans 8:28) when we are surrounded by fear, loneliness, loss, and uncertainty.

During times of trials, some people feel that God has abandoned them and they stop following Him. They see the crisis more clearly than they see God's hand at work or hear His voice speaking to them. They give up on their faith and stop trusting that God is still Lord of all.

However, **believers living by faith are faithful to God in times of trials.** The passage we're going to look at closely today comes from Psalm 44, which is given the title "Former Deliverances and Present Troubles" (NASB). We would be wise to consider this psalm in its entirety during these days, choosing like the sons of Korah to remember God's faithfulness in the past even when experiencing difficult times.

"All this has come upon us, but we have not forgotten You, and we have not dealt falsely with Your covenant. Our heart has not turned back, and our steps have not deviated from Your way," (Psalm 44:17-18).

I want to start with a few observations about these powerful words of prayer. First, notice that **the faithful always remember the God who saved them.** Severe trials had come upon God's people at the time Psalm 44 was written. The phrases, "You have rejected us and brought us to dishonor," (v. 9) and "all day long my dishonor is before me," (v. 15) point to the hurt and rejection felt by God's chosen people. But even in the face of extreme hardship, the faithful remembered God in their times of trial.

The phrase, "we have not forgotten you," in the focal passage makes me think of the words of the Lord Jesus as He broke the bread, saying, "do this in remembrance of Me," (1 Corinthians 11:24). In pain, in suffering, in trials, in hardship, and even in rejection, we choose to remember God's faithfulness and love as well as Jesus' sacrifice and triumph. Psalm 78:7 reminds us, "That they should put their confidence in God and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments." We trust, we remember, and we obey because we know that God has been faithful in the past and will continue to bring the good from the bad.

The faithful sincerely keep their agreement with the God who saved them. When we turn to Jesus as Savior and Lord, we have agreed to that very fact: He is our Savior and Lord. So as we trust Him to save us, both now and through eternity, we must also accept that He is Lord, and we submit to His authority. We choose to live according to His law and trust His path. Consider the following statements of faith:

- “All that the Lord has spoken we will do!” (Exodus 19:8)
- “All that you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go,” (Joshua 1:16)

We trust, remember, and obey God’s commandments.

The faithful don’t turn back from following the God who saved them. Look at the precise wording of Psalm 44: “our heart has not turned back.” Oh, many of the Lord’s chosen people have turned their backs on Him. Israel turned their backs in unbelief when God brought them to the Promised Land: “But turned back and acted treacherously like their fathers; they turned aside like a treacherous bow,” (Psalm 78:57). The Israelites, upon considering that God had led them to the Promised Land and instructed them to conquer it, were fearful: they feared the giants, the walled cities, and the weapons of the enemy. They were distracted from their calling, they forgot all that God had done for them, and they even went so far as to say they wanted to go back to Egypt. And, of course, you know what happened: their unbelief kept them out of the Promised Land (see Hebrews 3:19).

But the faithful keep following God’s way. God’s way is the path He laid out for us: it may not always be easy, it may not always seem pleasant, and we may sometimes think we got off the trail somewhere along the way. But we can trust that God is Sovereign, He is with us, and He will be faithful to us to the very end.

- “My foot has held fast to His path; I have kept His way and not turned aside,” (Job 23:11)
- “Many are my persecutors and my adversaries, yet I do not turn aside from Your testimonies,” (Psalm 119:157)
- “...the Lord has said to you, ‘You shall never again return that way,’” (Deuteronomy 17:16)

Personal Study Question: When life gets hard, what makes you quit believing God? What makes you stop following and obeying Jesus?

Remember these statements of faith when you struggle to remember God’s faithfulness:

- The faithful are few when trials come; most become discouraged or choose unbelief in the face of difficulty.
- The faithful remain faithful to God, regardless of discouragements.
- The faithful are assured that all trials and afflictions will never harm them ultimately; God will bless them in His perfect timing, (See Genesis 50:20).
- The faithful know that Jesus Christ gives mercy to help in time of need, (See Hebrews 4:16).

- The faithful know that all the trials in this life will never rob them of their spiritual treasure, including God’s presence, union with Christ, fellowship with the Spirit, and peace that passes all understanding.
- The faithful know that God sometimes delivers them from troubles with troubles. Allow me to explain that statement: our deliverance from troubles isn’t always the lack of trial, but the presence of it. Many of our spiritual troubles are solved when we face trials! Our earthly trials destroy false security, pride, legalism, hard-heartedness, luke-warmness, hypocrisy, and more.

Oh, church, I want us, individually and collectively, to strengthen our faith and cling tightly to God in these hard times. I want us to believe He is faithful to us even when we can’t tell how in the world the path will lead us to victory. I want us to strengthen each other with words of truth and encouragement. Feel free to use the following to strengthen your own faith or the faith of someone in need of the reminder to be faithful:

- Faithfulness is strengthened when we remember God’s blessings.
- Faithfulness is strengthened when we walk by faith.
- Faithfulness is strengthened as we love, worship, and thank God.
- Faithfulness is strengthened as we see the faithfulness of others.
- Faithfulness is strengthened when we remember the faithfulness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus was faithful to God (see Hebrews 3:2) and is ever faithful to us. As we believe and trust His faithfulness, we can allow Him to strengthen our own faith as we walk with Him.

Praying for you,
Pastor Mike

Week 7 of Stay at Home
Wednesday – Philippians 4:6-7
Prayer and Peace of Mind

Dear Church,

How has your prayer life been during these days of quarantine? Have you prayed more? Less? About the same? Have your prayers been different in nature? Has your prayer life strengthened your faith? What have you been asking from God? Specifically, have you been asking for your will to be done or for God's will to be done?

I ask these questions because today I want to turn our minds toward prayer in trying times. Today we consider this truth: **Believers' prayers to God bring God's peace to the mind.** Prayer is our spiritual connection to the Father. Like the ropes from a dock holding a boat to shore, our prayers tether us to the Lord.

Paul reminds us that prayer is the natural response of God's people:

"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus," (Philippians 4:6-7).

We can find many beautiful truths in these two verses, but today I want to focus on three. First, **We're instructed not to worry about anything.** Your first response to that might be, "Yeah, right, Pastor Mike! Have you been listening to the news?" Yes, I have. But this command did not come with any provisions, such as, "Be anxious for nothing unless there's a pandemic." No, we are to practice being not anxious. We don't fill our minds with anxiousness and we don't entertain anxious thoughts. In these days, people are anxious about many things: essential needs, jobs, family, the condition of the world, etc. **But those are things we, as believers, are not to worry about.**

Jesus spoke the words, "Do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things," (Matthew 5:25, 32). My friends, God knows what you need today! In this crisis, in any trying time, in trouble, in pain, in heartbreak, and even in joy, your Father loves you and is taking care of you. It's yet another way that God is working all things for good (see Romans 8:28): as we bring our unmet needs to Him, He proves Himself faithful and mighty.

What do we do, then, when our needs become pressing? **We pray about everything.** Pray about every need in your life, every burden in your life, every decision in your life, and every plan in your life. In the phrase, "by prayer and supplication," the word for *supplication* points to *needful persistence*. This picture is presented perfectly by Jesus' parable about a man asking his

friend for some bread at midnight; “because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs,” (see Matthew 11:5-8).

Personal Study Question: What is one persistent prayer you’ve asked of God many times? How has He changed you as you wait for His response?

In addition to praying about everything with needful persistence, we pray with thanksgiving. Oh, the blessing of thanking God for His blessings in the midst of presenting our requests to Him. There is blessing in laying our needs before the Lord and thanking Him for His response before our needs are met. There is blessing in thanking God for hearing us, for loving us, and for having compassion on us even as we wait for our needs to be met. Thank Him for His past help and care in your life; remember all His love and faithfulness.

When we choose not to be anxious and when we choose to pray, we **experience peace of mind by the peace of God**. Prayer is not the rubbing of a genie’s lamp, choosing to arrange our lives. No, it’s placing our lives in the hands of the Almighty God and trusting Him to be faithful. When we do that, the peace of God surpasses all comprehension, guards (or “umpires”) our minds, and unites us with Christ. Prayer is in no way taking our to-do list to God; quite the opposite, it’s releasing our to-do list and simply trusting Him with our day’s needs.

Let me share a few more points about the contrast between worry and prayer:

- Worriers pray selfishly. They pray for their own will—not God’s will—to be done.
- Worry is unbelief in God’s ability to provide for your needs.
- Anxiety is disobedience to the Lord’s command to not worry. We are living disobediently when we are living in worry.
- Prayer is speaking to our heavenly Father, trusting that He already knows our needs.
- Prayer and peace of mind bring peace in our spirit, stillness in our thoughts, evenness in our memories, focus in our meditation, rest in our cares, and calm in our storms.

Oh, my friends, I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: turn your worry list into your prayer list. Take the stresses of this world and, in prayer, leave them at the cross of Jesus. He has conquered sin and death; can He not conquer your worry list?

I’ll leave you with some daily guidelines for your prayers as you seek the peace of God this week:

- **Pray in faith**, trusting God, not knowing how and not knowing when He will provide.
- **Pray with all your heart**, trusting that you are heard by your loving heavenly Father.
- **Pray with a pure heart**, for sin stops prayer and deafens God’s ear to our requests.
- **Pray with humility**, for prayer is the request of the poor in spirit (see Matthew 5:3).

Your life may never be the same once you experience the faith-shattering prayer of faith that leads to the peace of God. Let’s pray like that, today and always!

Praying with you,
Pastor Mike

Week 8 of Stay at Home
Sunday – Psalm 34:1-3
Praising God

Dear Church,

How is your spiritual worship in these days of trouble? Worship may fall from our lips with ease during times of good fortune and evident blessings, but our worship is not contingent upon our outward circumstances. Because we know the almighty, all-knowing God who is working all things for good (see Romans 8:28), we praise Him *no matter what*.

Personal Study Question: What is the source of your praise today? Who are you boasting about?

When we sing and speak praise to God, it is our spiritual incense raised to Him in total honor. Today we focus on the truth that God's people praise God naturally, enduringly, and spiritually. Briefly said: **believers praise God at all times**. For today's focal passage, we turn to the words of David at one of the lowest points in his life: he was living as a fugitive in hiding, trying not to be killed by King Saul, feigning madness before Abimelech, who eventually drove David away. And it's in the midst of this terrifying situation that David penned these words:

**"I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth.
My soul will make its boast in the Lord; the humble will hear it and rejoice.
O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together," (Psalm 34:1-3)**

Let's look more closely at the three ways we praise the Lord. First, **believers naturally praise God**. We need look no farther than David: he was a man after God's own heart (see 1 Samuel 13:14), running for his life, trying to take care of his relatives and men, with few resources, and *yet he is still praising the Lord* regardless of his circumstances. Let's look at a few more words from the Psalms about praising God:

- "I will give thanks to the Lord with all my heart," (Psalm 9:1).
- "I will tell of Your name to my brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise You," (Psalm 22:22).
- "I will praise the name of God with song and magnify Him with thanksgiving," (Psalm 69:30).
- "I...will glorify Your name forever," (Psalm 86:12).

Can you hear it in the words above? **Praise is as natural as breathing for the believer in Jesus Christ**. The Hebrew word for "*bless*" means to kneel; when we "bless" God, we are kneeling to all He is. We adore God in His greatness, power, compassion, patience, forgiveness, and judgment. May we choose to praise like David: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name," (Psalm 103:1).

Next we observe that **believers enduringly praise God**. In our focal passage, David said, "I will bless the Lord at all times." This isn't the only time he made such a vow:

- “I will bless You as long as I live,” (Psalm 63:4)
- “I will bless Your name forever and ever,” (Psalm 145:1)
- “Every day I will bless you, and I will praise Your name forever and ever,” (Psalm 145:2).

God’s people praise Him in times of trouble as well as times of blessings. David and the psalmists weren’t the only ones to praise God in the face of difficulty: In Acts 4, we read of Peter and John being arrested and put on trial; they were reprimanded and released. When Peter and John shared with the fellow believers what the Jewish authorities had said, “they lifted their voices to God with one accord,” and praised God for His power over all the earth (Acts 4:24).

Lastly, we see that **believers spiritually praise God**. Praising God is physical; His praise begins in our brains and hearts and comes out of our mouths. Another Psalm says, “O Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Your praise,” (51:15). But singing or speaking words of blessing to the Lord is not the end of our physical praise: In Romans 12:1 we read that we are to “present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.” We walk in the Spirit; the Spirit leads us in our praise and in our obedience to the Lord. Our lives, lived for the glory of God and led by the Spirit of God, are our worship!

Personal Study Question: What is your mouth filled with today: complaints, gossip, fault-finding, or praise to the Lord?

Praise is not only physical but is also spiritual. In our focal passage David said, “my soul will make its boast in the Lord.” This isn’t only David’s mouth speaking; it’s his soul! With our soul—the aspect of our being that communicates with Almighty God—we also praise the Lord. Jesus spoke to this aspect of praise when He said, “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth,” (John 4:24). Paul gave us another glimpse at spiritual worship when he said we should be, “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord,” (Ephesians 5:19).

When praise fills our mouths, we bless God, we bless our own souls, and we bless those around us. Come, praise the Lord with me!

- Praising God blesses others. “The humble will hear it and rejoice,” (Psalm 34:2).
- Praising God is contagious! “O magnify the Lord with me,” (Psalm 34:3).
- Praising God is making melody in our heart to the Lord (see Ephesians 5:19). We can make melody in our heart with understanding (see 1 Corinthians 14:15), with all our affections (see Isaiah 5:1), with a thankful heart (see Colossians 3:15), with joyfulness, and with songs.
- Praising God can sweeten a prison, help us endure sufferings, and strengthen our heart and mind.

I am so thankful to Steve, our choir, and our musicians who lead us to the throne of grace every Sunday morning with their genuine praise and worship. Corporate worship in our church is one

way to remind us to praise. But I want you praising much more than on Sunday morning only! Here are just a few ways to make praise part of every day:

- **Adore God as you begin and end each day.** Start with the praise you already know, “Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed by Your name,” (Matthew 6:9).
- **Sing praise to God with your mouth and with your heart.** What songs has the Lord put in your heart today? The one in my heart right now starts, “There’s within my heart a melody Jesus whispers sweet and low, ‘Fear not I am with thee, peace be still, in all of life’s ebb and flow. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, sweetest name I know...”
- **Boast of God in your mind.** Brag on His nature, His identity, His works, His creativity, and all His mercy and grace!
- **Be a God promoter.** Magnify (multiply) God as you go through your day. Spread God’s name with your mouth. Tell of His wonderful greatness and salvation in Jesus.

We need not be meeting together in order to praise and worship our God. Practice your ongoing lifestyle of worship—in your heart, in your mouth, and in your soul—until we are together again.

Praising the Lord,
Pastor Mike

Week 8 of Stay at Home
Wednesday – Revelation 3:19-20
Accepting God’s Discipline

Dear Church,

Have you considered how God is using these days of pandemic, loss of control, and trouble to discipline His people? Yes, I’m talking about the church and, yes, I’m even talking to us individually. Have you come to accept these days as days of discipline from the Lord, not on the unbelieving world but for you personally?

What might God be saying to the church all around the world in these days of global disruption and disaster? Is the church listening to what the Lord is saying? **Are we listening to the Lord?**

These difficult days come from the Lord to discipline us. Now, we need not find anxiety in that statement, because the truth of Romans 8:28 still stands: “we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” **Believers accept the discipline of the Lord**, trusting His plan to bring about His glory and our good through trying times.

Today’s focal passage comes from the words that the Lord Jesus Christ spoke to the churches in Laodicea:

“Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me,” (Revelation 3:19-20).

My friends, **the Lord Jesus speaks to His church**. He spoke through John in the book of Revelation, and He still speaks to us today. In that same chapter we read, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches,” (Revelation 3:13). Who is the messenger that Jesus uses to speak to the church? The Holy Spirit. We see after the Lord ascended to heaven that there are numerous examples of the Holy Spirit speaking and leading the church in the book of Acts. Paul describes the Spirit’s leadership and the Spirit’s direction to him in his ministry. We, like the early church, have that same Spirit! The Lord promised that the Holy Spirit would teach us God’s truth based on God’s word: “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you,” (John 14:26).

I’d love to encourage you to spend some time studying the Lord’s words to the churches, found in Revelation 1—3. In these chapters, He speaks directly to a specific church in Asia Minor. Repeatedly, Jesus describes Himself and then speaks to the church. We would be wise to know His words, heed His words, and dwell on His words even in our own day. Micah teaches us: “The voice of the Lord will call to the city—and it is sound wisdom to fear Your name,” (6:9).

Personal Study Question: As you read and study your Bible, do you hear the Lord speaking in this time of pandemic?

Not only does the Lord Jesus speak to His church but **He also knows the condition of His church**. In Revelation 3:15, He spoke to the Laodiceans, “I know your deeds.” My friends, *the Lord Jesus knows His church inside and out*. He knows the deeds of the church (see Revelation 3:15), the trials of the church (see Revelation 2:9), the place where the church ministers (see Revelation 2:13), the love and faith of the church (see Revelation 2:19), the spiritual health of the church (see Revelation 3:1), and even the heart condition of the church (see Revelation 3:15-16).

And because He knows us fully and perfectly, **Jesus lovingly disciplines His church**. You saw it earlier: “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline,” (Revelation 3:19). We must never doubt Jesus’ love for us; because He loves us, though, He is going to reveal to us when we need correction. He is Almighty, Eternal, Savior and Lord and He has every right to rebuke us in our tepid faith. In Revelation and today, the Lord disciplines the church by the conditions He sends into their lives. He will remove His power, He will remove His blessing, and He will narrow the path of those who are unwilling to respond to His discipline:

- “I will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent,” (Revelation 2:5)
- “I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth,” (Revelation 2:16)
- He will send tribulation and pestilence if needed (see Revelation 2:22-23)

So in light of all of this, **the church must respond and accept the discipline of the Lord**. The Lord appealed for His church to be zealous (see Revelation 3:19), which means to fervently seek Him with a true heart, focused to do His will in the world. The Greek word for *zeal* means “to burn.” Are you hot in your pursuit of God and in doing His works? Maybe you’ve heard the phrase, “on fire for God?” Are you on fire for God or have you cooled off? Paul says, “Christ Jesus...gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds,” (Titus 2:13-14). Christian zeal is the fire from God to follow the Lord Jesus and to do the works that glorify God.

Next, the Lord calls the church to repent. When we repent, we turn from our sinfulness, agree with Him, and come back into fellowship. *Repentance* is the Greek word made of two words which mean, “to change your mind.” Do these days of trial press you to change your mind about your walk with God? How sad it will be if you return to your life routine, still holding unforgiveness in your heart or obsessed with lustful passions or conforming to the world’s demands and values. **Accept the Lord’s discipline; turn from your sin and come back to life!**

As we close today’s lesson, here are a few things to remember:

- It is in love and faithfulness that the Lord brings trials to discipline His people.
- Times of trouble are used to wake up the church.
- Trials are God’s way of speaking to the church about His power and authority.

- Seasons of suffering sometimes come to the church to purify and strengthen the church.
- Carelessness and neglecting to hear the Lord's word during trials results in His hard discipline on the church.
- Hearing the Lord in trials helps us see God's work in trouble.
- God's people are saved from spiritual decline when they hear the Lord's call.

Oh, church, we can be certain that the Lord is speaking to us in these days. None of us is without fault; each of us can hear His voice and turn from our sins. Here are a few questions to ask yourself in daily reflection:

- Do you have spiritual ears to hear what the Lord is saying to you in these days of pandemic?
- Will First Baptist Dickson hear what the Lord is saying to us in these days of pandemic?
- Are you zealous for God?
- What have you repented of in these days of trials?

I have been blessed as I prepared and shared with you these sixteen lessons during the 2020 pandemic. I have prayed for us, I have sought to encourage us with the word of God, and I have looked forward to meeting together as a group again! May you look back on these days and see God's mighty hand, bringing good from the bad and calling you closer to Him.

In love,
Pastor Mike

Appendix 1
God's Words for the Days of the Pandemic
The Blessing of Scripture Prayers

Here are the Scriptures that I prayed and cherished during the days of pandemic. The first few have been turned into sample prayers as an example to you. I sincerely pray you will use these as a reference for your own life in times when you feel isolated, hopeless, or anxious.

Deuteronomy 17:16 – Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, since the Lord has said to you, “You shall never again return that way.”

Lord, in days of panic I choose not to multiply my hope in worldly goods; I choose to multiply my hope in You. Lord, I know you have a path for me that does not take me back to where I was. Thank You, Father.

Job 14:14 – All the days of my struggle I will wait until my change comes.

I will wait, Lord. I will wait in the struggle and in the joy and in the mundane. You are sovereign, and I trust Your timing in my life.

Job 23:13–16 – He is unique and who can turn Him? And what His soul desires that He does. For He performs what is appointed for me, and many such decrees are with Him. Therefore I would be dismayed at His presence, when I consider, I am terrified of Him.

Lord, I want the faith to say these words with confidence. I know you desire that I turn to You, and I know your presence would provoke terror if I had spiritual eyes to see. May I celebrate your holiness and praise Your glory, even when I don't know what you are doing and am afraid of what lies ahead.

Psalms 28:5 – Because they do not regard the works of the Lord not the deeds of His hands, He will tear them down and not build them up.

Psalms 33:11 – The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation.

Psalms 33:18–20 – Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him, on those who hope for His lovingkindness, to deliver their soul from death and to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the Lord; He is our help and our shield.

Psalms 57:1-2 – Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me. For my soul takes refuge in You; and in the shadow of Your wings I will take refuge until destruction passes by. I will cry to God Most High, to God who accomplishes all things for me.

Psalm 138:8 – The Lord will accomplish what concerns me; Your lovingkindness, O Lord, is everlasting; do not forsake the works of Your hands.

Psalm 34:9 – O fear the Lord you His saints; for to those who fear the Him there is no want.

Proverbs 19:21 – Many plans are in a man’s heart, but the counsel of the Lord will stand.

Psalm 115:3 – But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases

Psalm 135:6 – Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and all deeps

Ecclesiastes 1:15 – What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted.

Ecclesiastes 7:13 – Consider the work of God, for who can straighten what He has bent?

Isaiah 8:12-13 - ...and you are not to fear what they fear or be in dread of it. It is the Lord of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He shall be your fear, and He shall be your dread.

Isaiah 14:24 – The Lord of hosts has sworn saying, “Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand.”

Isa. 14:27 – The Lord has planned it, and who can frustrate it? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?

Isaiah 17:11 – Your only harvest will be a load of grief and unrelieved pain. (NLT)

Isaiah 25:1 – O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt You, I will give thanks to Your name; for You have worked wonders, plans formed long ago, with perfect faithfulness.

Isaiah 45:22 – Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God and there is no other.

Isaiah 46:9-10 – Remember this, and be assured; recall it to mind, you transgressors. Remember the former things long past, for I am God and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure.’

Daniel 4:35 – And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What have you done?’

Micah 6:9 –The voice of the Lord will call to the city—and it is sound wisdom to fear your name: ‘Hear, O tribe. Who has appointed its time?’

Amos 3:6, 8 – If a trumpet is blown in a city will not the people tremble? If a calamity occurs in a city has not the Lord done it? A lion has roared! Who will not fear?

Psalms 65:5 – By awesome deeds you answer us in righteousness, O God of our salvation, You who are the trust of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest sea.

Ephesians 1:11 – ...also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will...

Romans 2:3–6 – But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to every man according to his deeds.