

Devotionals
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A Firm And Gentle Resolve

7-3-06

In the message "Without Compromise" we saw three young Jewish men face the ultimate test of their convictions. When the king threatened to throw them into a blazing furnace if they did not bow to a golden image, the three calmly refused to compromise; "We will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Daniel 3:18).

These three men had learned the importance of convictions when they were first brought as captives to Babylon. They were selected, along with another young man named Daniel, for a special program to prepare them to serve the Babylonian king. One of the "benefits" of this program was being fed choice food and drink from the king's table. But Daniel knew these special favors were designed to pull them into a culture that did not honor God.

Daniel 1:8

"Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way."

Although Daniel was determined not to partake in the ways of his captives, his initial approach was to graciously ask permission for him and his friends to follow their convictions. Daniel was resolved, but he also knew the importance of serving God through his interaction with other people.

Daniel continued to minister in this foreign land for over sixty years. He was a respected advisor to four different kings and taught them many lessons about the One True God. During this time, his faith was severely tested and he often faced great pressures to adopt the value system of ungodly people. But Daniel was prepared with a resolve that he would continue to follow God and God alone.

Many of us live in an environment which is hostile to the ways of God. Some are in work environments which actively promote ungodly activities and strike down those who even mention God. Many more of us face subtle hostilities which call faith a crutch for the weak and uneducated, and teach a truth which is relative and continually changing. Many ministry leaders even face pressures to dilute the gospel truth in the name of a distorted view of grace, tolerance, and the importance of increased membership.

We must resolve not to defile ourselves by compromising our convictions or lowering our standards - our lives as well as our message must remain true to God's Word. But we must also keep the doors open for the opportunity to minister and shine His light into the darkness. Our convictions must stand firm; and yet, they must be implemented with true grace and compassion. Let's show the world around us the unfailing and never-changing love of God through a firm and gentle resolve.

Have A Great Day!

Patiently Trust His Timing

7-4-06

God's direction and timing is always perfect and always with a purpose - but it's often with a purpose we may not initially see or understand. Even when we earnestly ask for direction through prayer and the study of His Word, God's answers are usually not what we expect and are often perceived as slow in arriving...but His direction and timing still remains, always perfect and always with a purpose.

God called Abraham to follow Him when Abraham was already seventy-five years old. But God blessed Abraham with great abundance and soon promised he would have many descendants; "I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted" (Genesis 13:16).

Although this was a wonderful promise from God, it certainly didn't seem possible. Not only was Abraham an old man, but his wife, Sarah, had never been able to have children and now was long past the normal child bearing years. Therefore, when Sarah failed to become pregnant - when God's promise was apparently going to be unfulfilled - she formulated a plan to "help" God.

Genesis 16:2

"The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her."

Since this was an accepted practice and seemed like a reasonable way to fulfill God's promise, Abraham agreed. Not surprisingly, great tension soon developed between Sarah and her maidservant. This tension increased when Ishmael was born and even continues today with the unfortunate hostilities we see in the region of the Middle East. Abraham clearly heard the call and promise of God, but he became impatient with God's timing and resorted to a worldly solution.

It was another thirteen years before God fulfilled His promise through the birth of Isaac. These were thirteen long years of waiting and wondering if God had forgotten...but God's direction and timing is always perfect and always with a purpose. With Abraham one hundred years old and Sarah ninety, the birth of Isaac left no doubt that God was in complete control and guiding the events in Abraham's life.

In a very real sense, we are foreigners in this place and time; "Aliens and strangers on earth" (Hebrews 11:13). We will never understand how all the pieces fit together until we stand before the Creator of the Universe. Until then, we must continue to love and worship Him with all our heart. We must continue to seek His face and ask His guidance for every step. We must continue to follow His direction and patiently trust His timing.

Have A Great Day!

His Calm Within The Storm

7-5-06

In the message "Patiently Trust His Timing" we considered Abraham and Sarah as they waited for God's promise through the birth of Isaac. Waiting for God's direction and blessing can be a great test of our faith, but waiting on God for our rescue can be an even greater challenge.

There are three great storms detailed in the New Testament. The first occurred when Jesus was crossing the Sea of Galilee with His disciples. Jesus was asleep when the storm began, and the disciples became afraid and woke Him: "Lord save us! We're going to drown!" (Matthew 8:25). Jesus rebuked the disciples for their fear and proceeded to calm the storm; "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" (Matthew 8:26).

The second storm occurred immediately after the miraculous feeding of over five thousand people. This time, Jesus sent the disciples across the sea by themselves; and when the storm rose up, Jesus went out to them - walking on the water. As Jesus again calmed the storm, He spoke the same message against fear; "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid" (Matthew 14:27).

The last storm occurred about thirty years after Jesus was crucified. Paul had proclaimed the gospel through much of the Roman empire and was being transported by boat to stand trial in Rome. A storm arose which blew the ship terribly off course. The ship was battered and tossed for several days: "We finally gave up all hope of being saved" (Acts 27:20).

It must have been difficult to trust God's timing as the storm continued through the many long days and sleepless nights. But as hope was fading away, God sent an angel to Paul with a familiar message.

Acts 27:23-24

"Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me and said, 'Do not be afraid.'"

There may be times when our ability to trust is severely tested. But our faith in God - in His ability to hold us secure - must be independent of the force of the wind. Though the winds may blow, we remain in His hands and must not fear; "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, but even if He does not..." (Daniel 3:17-18).

Most storms last longer than we prefer. But our Heavenly Father is leading us to the place where we can have peace, contentment, and even joy, whether the sun is shining or the storm is raging. He is calling us to be free of fear; calling us to trust Him more and experience His calm within the storm.

Have A Great Day!

Leave No Regrets

7-6-06

When my mom was forty-three years old, she developed skin cancer and died within four months of the first diagnosis. As a young man in my twenties, I remember forty-three seeming much older than it does now. As I approached the age of forty-three, I also developed a case of the same skin cancer which took my mom's life. Fortunately, the detection and treatment of skin cancer has greatly improved and I am fine - praise God! But this combination of events caused me to seriously ponder: "What if this day was my last? Would I have any regrets?"

John the Baptist discovered the uncertainty of each moment of life as he sat in prison.

I guess they call me "John the Baptist" because I preached a message of repentance and baptized with water while pointing the way to Jesus (John 1:31-33). "The Baptist" isn't such a bad name. I could have been called "John the Wearer of Camel Hair" or "John the Eater of Locusts."

King Herod must have been mad at me for exposing his sin of marrying his brother's wife (Matthew 14:3-4). I sure wish I was back in the desert preaching; but God must have a plan for me here in prison. I think Herod actually likes me. He often listens to me talk and seems genuinely interested (Mark 6:20). It's pretty loud in the palace tonight. They must be having quite a party.

Matthew 14:6-10

"On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for them and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, 'Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.' The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison."

Wow, that was fast! No time to say good-bye or write letters to my friends - no time to even gather my thoughts - just, "lean over and put your neck on the block." I sure wish I would have.....

No one knows when they will breathe their last; we may have sixty years or sixty minutes, but either way it will seem to pass in an instant. The time to place our saving faith in Jesus is NOW! The time to restore relationships and encourage others with the gospel is NOW! The time to enjoy our family is NOW! And the time to praise God for His blessings and grace (more than anything else in life!) is absolutely NOW!!

Each of us enter this day with things we wish we could change; decisions and words which have not been honoring to God. But each of us also enter this day with the ability to begin, right this very moment, to live a life which glorifies God in all we do. Let's begin today to live a life fully committed to faithfully following Christ. Let's live toward an end which will leave no regrets.

Have A Great Day!

John 5:30-35 - Lesson #56
7-7-06

While speaking with the Jewish leaders, Jesus made it clear He was on an equal level with God; "For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself" (John 5:26). And yet, Jesus consistently submitted Himself to the authority of the Father.

John 5:30-35

"I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me. If I bear witness of Myself, My witness is not true. There is another who bears witness of Me, and I know that the witness which He witnesses of Me is true. You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. Yet I do not receive testimony from man, but I say these things that you may be saved. He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light."

Jesus, "who being in the form of God" (Philippians 2:6), sought only the will of the Father. He would later speak about unity; "I and My Father are one" (John 10:30), but here His focus is on dependence. Jesus never acts alone. His judgment is righteous because it is perfectly aligned with the judgment of the Father.

Jesus made some bold claims and then built a case for why His claims should be believed. First, He acknowledged the Jewish law that self testimony is not valid; "by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established" (Deuteronomy 19:15). The words and claims of Jesus were true, but they could not be considered as sufficient testimony of truth. Other forms of testimony were required.

When Jesus said, "there is another..." He was referring to the Father. It is not His will nor His testimony, but the will and testimony of the Father which Jesus holds as true. However, He immediately transitioned to the popular testimony of John the Baptist. This was a witness which the Jewish leaders could not ignore.

John the Baptist preached a message of repentance to prepare people for the message of Jesus: "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness; Make straight the way of the Lord" (John 1:23). He described Jesus as, "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29) and with great clarity as, "the Son of God" (John 1:34). The Jewish leaders had received the testimony of John and even rejoiced in his message for a short time. But when the full extent of his testimony was revealed in the message and life of Jesus, they were not willing to believe.

Jesus Christ came with a message of hope and truth; "the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). He used many methods to teach His truth. In the case with these Jewish leaders, Jesus appealed to their sense of legal truth through the testimony of multiple witnesses. But no matter what the method, the message was always the same - Jesus Christ came so that you may be saved.

Have A Great Day!

Guided By Closed Doors

7-10-06

As we continue our search for God's direction - patiently waiting and actively seeking His presence - we ought to rejoice with every single step He reveals. As we draw closer to Jesus, we will desire, more and more, to only take steps which are aligned with His will. Therefore, ANY direction from God - no matter which way He leads and no matter what method He uses to direct - should be a reason to rejoice.

During his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul received specific direction from Jesus; "get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do" (Acts 9:6). A few years later, the Spirit of God specifically directed Paul to begin his first missionary journey; "Set apart for me Barnabas and {Paul} for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2).

Midway through Paul's second journey, God directed Paul through peace and assurance: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you" (Acts 18:9-10). And at the end of his third journey, Paul once again received specific direction; "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem" (Acts 20:22).

God often leads us by opening doors and lighting a path for us to follow. But there are also many times when God directs us by simply telling us where NOT to go.

Acts 16:6-7

"Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to."

Paul was still walking with God - still being directed by His Spirit - but now God's direction was in the form of closed doors. Paul never appeared to get discouraged when God closed a door, he simply allowed himself to be redirected toward whatever door God opened.

So much of our Christian growth is a process of relinquishing control and trusting God to completely direct our life. He alone is in control of the doors; "What He opens no one can shut, and what He shuts no one can open" (Revelation 3:7). It's a mixture of pride and foolishness which causes us to continually push on doors which God has closed.

Our Heavenly Father is constantly guiding and calling us to trust Him more. He opens doors which require us to step through in faith, and closes doors which require us to patiently wait. His guiding hand is always a reason to rejoice - even when we are lovingly guided by closed doors.

Have A Great Day!

The Lord is God - Follow Him

7-11-06

Soon after entering the promised land of Canaan, the children of Israel forgot about God and all He had done. They soon began to worship the false gods of Baal and the love-goddess, Asherah. It seemed like every generation from that time forward was tempted into worshipping these false gods.

About five hundred years later, God rose up Elijah to be His chosen spokesman - His prophet. The Israelites were still being enticed to worship other gods, and the time had come for a direct confrontation between Elijah and the many false prophets of Baal: "Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal" (1 Kings 18:19).

Elijah and the false prophets were to pray to their respective gods. The "winner" would be determined by the answer to the prayers: "You call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord. The god who answers by fire - He is God" (1 Kings 18:24). But prior to calling on the Lord, Elijah gave a challenge for the people of Israel to make a commitment.

1 Kings 18:21

"How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal is God, follow him."

Elijah prayed, and God answered with enough fire to remove any and all doubt. The people clearly saw the hand of the Lord and readily made their choice: "The Lord - He is God! The Lord - He is God!" (1 Kings 18:39).

We face the same challenge today. However, instead of two or three choices, we now have many gods which continually entice us into worship - many gods who desire our time and energy. The world offers a long list of "worthy" candidates - television, money, power, prestige, sex, drugs, food, sports, internet, education...the list goes on: "These gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth, will perish from the earth and from under the heavens" (Jeremiah 10:11). Who (or what) is truly worthy of our worship?

The challenge today is simple. If the Lord is God - follow Him. If we have recognized our sinful condition, repented of our sin and asked Jesus to be our Savior, we must continue by being transformed into His likeness - we must follow Him. We cannot allow the "distractions" in life to become our god. We must devote our heart, soul, mind and strength to loving our Heavenly Father, and commit ourselves to whatever tasks He has given us to accomplish. Our choice is clear, and our response must be boldly decisive. The Lord is God - Follow Him!

Have A Great Day!

A Fragile Victory

7-12-06

In the message "The Lord is God - Follow Him" we saw how Elijah was used to demonstrate God's power and call the people of Israel back to a life of worship. Elijah witnessed the miraculous and unequalled power of God as he prayed during his confrontation with the 450 prophets of Baal; "The fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, ... and also licked up the water in the trench" (1 Kings 18:38).

After this unquestioned answer to prayer, Elijah climbed to the top of Mount Carmel and prayed for rain - there had not been rain in the land for three years. Once again, Elijah witnessed the miraculous hand of God; "The sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose and a heavy rain came" (1 Kings 18:45). But within a few days of these great spiritual victories, Queen Jezebel vowed to have Elijah killed. As soon as Elijah heard of the Queen's threat, he became afraid and ran for his life into the desert.

1 Kings 19:4

"He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. 'I have had enough, Lord,' he said. 'Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.'"

Elijah was a man who spoke directly with God and clearly witnessed His awesome power; yet, he fell into great despair when faced with this new adversity.

What caused Elijah to become so fragile? Had he already forgotten God's power? Had a few victories caused him to take his eyes off God and begin to rely on his own strength? Or was he just worn out from being on the front line of ministry? Whatever the cause, in his moment of greatest victory, Elijah became the most vulnerable to attack and failure; "I have had enough, Lord."

When life is a struggle, we must pray and "trust in the Lord with all our heart" (Proverbs 3:5). When life is running smooth, we must pray harder and trust even more. But when we experience victory and dance on top of the mountain - when we begin to feel strong and "self" assured - we must pray as if our very life depended on it and lean on the Lord as never before. Our moments of greatest vulnerability to enemy attack come when we begin to think we no longer require God's help.

Let's keep our eyes on Jesus and continue to renew our strength through prayer and the study of His Word. We must always remember how He told His closest followers, "apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). The only way we accomplish anything is through the strength of Christ. And as His promises are fulfilled in our lives, we must prepare for a sustained and constant walk of faith. Let's examine our need to daily walk in His presence and always guard against a fragile victory.

Have A Great Day!

Touch of Compassion

7-13-06

In the last two messages, we've seen how the prophet Elijah was used to call the people of Israel back to worship of the One True God. We saw Elijah witness the mighty power of God but then become afraid and run into the desert when threatened by the Queen.

How would God handle His chosen prophet - His messenger who had been assigned to proclaim the Truth to the people of Israel? What would God say to the man who was now crumpled under a tree wishing to die: "I have had enough, Lord. Take my life" (1 Kings 19:4).

1 Kings 19:5-6

"All at once an angel touched him and said, 'Get up and eat.' He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again."

God could have chastised and rebuked Elijah. He could have answered with a loud thunder, "Am I not the God who rained down fire from Heaven and then blackened the sky with clouds? Have I not answer your prayers? How can you now doubt Me and wish to die because of your fear?"

Yes, God could have given His "How can you doubt Me?" speech, but He didn't. Rather, God saw Elijah's tired pain and showed simple compassion. He ministered to Elijah by sending an angel to give a gentle touch and bake a cake. The time would soon come for Elijah to rise and follow hard after God; but for now, God comforted Elijah and allowed for a very necessary rest.

We must continue to learn what it means to be a loving and caring Family. All who have been saved through faith in the sacrifice of Jesus have been "baptized by one Spirit into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13). And as members of "one body," we must learn to effectively minister and truly help one another.

Very few circumstances require us to provide a complete solution. We usually must avoid trying to "fix" what we believe has been broken. Most often, our Brothers and Sisters simply need a friend who will listen and show they care by helping them rest and regain their strength. It's amazing how many Spiritual truths are seen clear after a little cake and a good night of sleep.

So many of God's children face pain, weariness, fears and frustration which keep them from experiencing the fullness of God's joy and peace. But each of us can help ease the pain and lighten the load through biblical words of truth and encouragement along with a gentle touch of compassion.

Have A Great Day!

John 5:36-40 - Lesson #57
7-14-06

Jesus built a defense for His position along side God the Father because He was concerned for the eternal soul of His listeners; "I say these things that you may be saved" (John 5:34). As He talked to the Jewish leaders, He appealed to their sense of legal proof in the testimony of multiply witnesses. Jesus pointed to the testimony of John the Baptist, "this is the Son of God" (John 1:34), and then supplied additional evidence.

John 5:36-40

"But I have a greater witness than John's; for the works which the Father has given Me to finish - the very works that I do - bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me. And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form. But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe. You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life."

Jesus identified His many miracles as the works which testified of Him. Each miracle Jesus performed was for the purpose of giving glory to God and pointing to Himself as God's "only begotten Son" (John 3:16). Peter would use this same appeal when speaking to those gathered on the Day of Pentecost: "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst" (Acts 2:22).

Miracles were never the focus of His ministry, but Jesus knew His works were an important part of who He was. When John the Baptist sent disciples to Jesus to confirm He was "the Coming One" (Matthew 11:3), Jesus responded by saying: "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them" (Matthew 11:4-5). Likewise, our actions (or lack of actions) become a testimony of what we really believe; "those who believe in God should be careful to maintain good works" (Titus 3:8).

The final witness Jesus called in His defense was the very Word of God which the Jewish leaders held so dear. But in calling this witness, Jesus also made some biting accusations. God had given the written Word as a record of His mighty Hand working through all history, as well as His plan for the restoration of a relationship broken by sin. The Jewish leaders loved the Word and studied with great diligence, but they failed to see the true message; "they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge" (Romans 10:2).

All Scripture points to Jesus; "And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27). Let's make sure that in our study of great truths we don't miss the greatest truth of all. God's plan, as testified to by multiple witnesses, is that Jesus Christ - the Son of God - came to set us free from sin and bring us back to the arms of a loving Father for all eternity.

Have A Great Day!

His Gentle Whisper

7-17-06

In the message "Touch of Compassion" we saw God's understanding and mercy as He sent an angel to comfort Elijah during his moment of deepest despair. The angel demonstrated great compassion by offering food to Elijah and helping him regain his strength.

God then sent Elijah on a forty day journey through the desert - a journey which ended at the same mountain where Moses received the Ten Commandments. When confronted by God on the mountain, Elijah honestly expressed his discouragement: "The Israelites have rejected Your covenant...I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too" (1 Kings 19:8).

Elijah felt utterly alone. He understood the holiness of God and how far his people had strayed from God's path; but he also felt overwhelmed and helpless, unable to make a significant impact on God's Kingdom. God answered Elijah by calling him to be Spiritually revived; "stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord" (1 Kings 19:11).

1 Kings 19:11-13

"Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face."

Every one who desires to walk God's path and serve Him with all their heart will sooner or later relate to Elijah. It's unfortunate, but many will face Elijah's overwhelming helplessness time and time again; the mission is simply too great when we only consider our limited ability. But no matter what the problem, God's solution is always the same - we must come into His presence, be clothed with His strength, and listen intently for His leading.

We often assume that when the Creator of The Universe desires to "speak," it will be with a thundering call; "Walk this way!!" But God desires for our heart, soul, mind, and strength to be focused on Him; to be free of the clutter and noise - the distractions which tend to "choke the word, making it unfruitful" (Mark 4:19). A major part of God's calling to all His Children is for us to simply be prepared to truly hear. It's therefore not surprising that God most often speaks in a whisper during the quiet and still moments of our life.

No matter how busy we become, we must set aside time which is quiet and undisturbed - time where we can enter into the presence of God, worship Him, and listen. God desires to encourage us and give us clear direction today. Let's love Him with all our heart and listen intently for His gentle whisper.

Have A Great Day!

What Are You Doing Here

7-18-06

In the last several messages we have considered the prophet Elijah as he was used by God to miraculously confront the 450 prophets of Baal, but then sank into a deep despair when threatened by Queen Jezebel; "I have had enough Lord, take my life" (1 Kings 19:4). We saw how God demonstrated His compassion, sent Elijah on a forty day journey through the desert, and revealed His presence in a gentle whisper (1 Kings 19:12). But after all this, God had a very serious question for Elijah.

1 Kings 19:13

"Then a voice said to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'"

Obviously, the question was not in reference to Elijah's physical location. Elijah was standing on the mountain because God had called him to that exact location. Though God already knew the answer, His question was asking Elijah what had brought him to this Spiritually defeated condition. Elijah had been given the opportunity to talk with God, witness His power, and actually stand in His presence; yet, he was filled with doubt and felt terribly alone; "I am the only one left" (1 Kings 19:14).

Once again, God could have lectured Elijah on his lack of faith. Instead, in His mercy, God gave Elijah the reassurance he needed to continue; "I reserve seven thousand in Israel - all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal" (1 Kings 19:18). God encouraged Elijah that there were many others fighting this same battle. He also gave Elijah a companion who would walk with him for the remainder of His ministry; "Anoint Elisha to succeed you as prophet" (1 Kings 19:17).

Jesus Christ died as a sacrifice for our sin so we could be restored to a loving relationship with our Heavenly Father. This relationship saves us from an eternal death in the fiery pit of hell; but it also allows us to be saved from the despair, fear, loneliness, and lack of purpose which surrounds us in the world today.

We are eternally saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. But as we walk, we must trust God to daily save us from the effects of a fallen world and our own weak and sinful nature. We must never be afraid or ashamed to tell God exactly how we feel: "I'm weak and lonely, Lord. I need You!" Nothing we say will ever surprise God or cause Him to let us go.

Our Heavenly Father has called us to examine our heart, confess our condition, and trust Him for the solution - He has called us to be saved! Our strength in the Lord will often depend on recognizing and admitting our weakness. Let's strive to live each day in His presence; but let's also be prepared to respond honestly and without fear when God asks: "What are you doing here?"

Have A Great Day!

Spiritual Companions

7-19-06

In our current series of messages, we've considered Elijah as he experienced great victory on Mount Carmel but was then overcome with fear and loneliness. We saw how God provided comfort by first sending an angel and then through the gentle whisper of His presence (1 Kings 19:5-13). But Elijah clearly revealed some long term Spiritual needs which could not be ignored; "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty...{but} I am the only one left" (1 Kings 19:14).

Elijah felt alone in his devotion to God and alone in his ministry. This loneliness was affecting his judgement as well as his ability to persevere under stress. He needed a Spiritual companion who would encourage him and walk by his side. God recognized this need and sent him Elisha; "anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet" (1 Kings 19:16). Elijah was not being replaced; rather, given the many "opportunities" for future discouragement, God provided someone to share the burden, provide encouragement, and be trained for future ministry.

Elisha was in the field plowing with a team of oxen when Elijah first called him to follow. Elisha's response was immediate and decisive, and he was devoted to Elijah for the remainder of his ministry.

1 Kings 19:21

"He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant."

God never intended for us to go into battle alone. While He is always at our side, ready to intervene, His Word also directs us to draw upon the strength of others; "Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (Hebrews 3:13).

Immediately after creating the first man, God said; "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). We were created to be people who need one another; "Two are better than one...if one falls down, his friend can help him up" (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10). Jesus demonstrated this wisdom as He sent messengers to proclaim that the Kingdom of God is near; "the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them TWO BY TWO ahead of Him" (Luke 10:1). Difficult tasks require mutual support and encouragement.

As we travel down God's path, let's listen to His counsel and not walk alone. Let's entrust our lives to our Heavenly Father and seek other believers who will encourage us to remain in His presence and aligned with His perfect will. Let's pray that God would bless us with courage and strength...and also with an abundance of committed Spiritual companions.

Have A Great Day!

A Double Portion

7-20-06

In the message "Spiritual Companions" we saw how, at the time of his greatest need, God gave Elijah a Spiritual companion to share the burdens as well as the joys of ministry (I'm so glad God understands this need in His children!). Elisha served as Elijah's attendant for many years while learning the ways of God. Just before the end of Elijah's ministry - immediately before "Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind" (2 Kings 2:11) - Elisha made a bold request of his mentor.

2 Kings 2:9

"Elijah said to Elisha, 'Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?' 'Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,' Elisha replied."

According to Jewish law, a double portion of the inheritance was given to the firstborn son. This son would also have the honor of leading the family. By boldly asking for a double portion of Elijah's spirit, Elisha was asking to inherit Elijah's prophetic ministry and his ability to serve God. Elisha could have made many different requests, but he asked to be blessed with an increased ability to serve.

God granted Elisha's request and used him to perform many miracles and serve as a prophet for more than 50 years (almost twice as long as Elijah). God granted his request because Elisha's motives were pure; his heart was firmly set on worshiping God through his service and proclaiming His Word throughout the land.

Solomon made a similar request when God offered to grant him anything he asked; "Give your servant a discerning heart to govern Your people and to distinguish between right and wrong" (1 Kings 3:9). The primary focus of our requests should always be to draw closer to God and glorify Him in all we do. Jesus said if this is the one true desire of our heart, all our other needs will also be satisfied; "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

Our Heavenly Father desires to abundantly bless His children as we seek His kingdom. He desires to increase our abilities, knowledge, wisdom, peace, and all manner of gifts - He desires for us to inherit these blessings as firstborn sons, "coheirs with Christ" (Romans 8:17). And when He blesses those with pure hearts, we ought to remember that He "is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20).

God honors the prayers of those who love Him with ALL their heart and desire to increase their ability to serve. Let's "approach the throne of grace with confidence" (Hebrews 4:16) and live our lives as firstborn sons. Let's inherit all He has promised, and glorify His name as we boldly ask to be blessed with a double portion!

Have A Great Day!

John 5:41-47 - Lesson #58
7-21-06

In building His case for being equal with God, Jesus called upon the testimonies of God the Father, John the Baptist, His own miracles, and, as final evidence, the testimony of the Word of God; "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me" (John 5:39). Jesus concluded with a pointed attack against "the Jews {who} sought all the more to kill Him" (John 5:18).

John 5:41-47

"I do not receive honor from men. But I know you, that you do not have the love of God in you. I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive. How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from the only God? Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you - Moses, in whom you trust. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?"

Jesus could see directly into the heart of His accusers; "He knew what was in man" (John 2:25), and He knew that although they had the Scriptures they did not have the true love of God. Through various testimonies, Jesus showed He was sent from the Father, and yet He was not received. But there were several others during the time of Christ - and more during the following century - who would claim to be the Anointed One and were received with open arms. These self appointed messiahs promised victory over their Roman oppressors and one by one were proven to be false.

The promised message of a Spiritual victory for all eternity had been sadly missed because those who studied the Scripture did so to build their own standing; "for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God" (John 12:43). They had forgotten that the only purpose of Scripture is to reveal God and His wonderful plan of salvation. The message of Jesus was new, but it was also a message which had long been revealed: "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17).

The Jews had the writings of Moses; and Jesus made it clear that those very writings were the ones that now accused them; "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead" (Luke 16:31). If they truly believed the writings they had already been given, they would also believe the One sent in fulfillment of those writings.

We are all held accountable to the truth we receive. Jesus will never accuse us before the Father. But if we fail to believe the now complete Scripture - which we have all been blessed to hold in our hands - we already stand accused. The plan of Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ has been clearly revealed. He is the Son of God sent as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin. Now is the time to believe and receive.

Have A Great Day!

God's Provision

7-24-06

During the ministry of Elisha, a widow came to him for financial help. Creditors had come and threatened to take her two boys as slaves in exchange for payment of debt. The woman reported that all she had left was a little oil, but Elisha told her how to miraculously multiply her oil and pay her bills.

2 Kings 4:3

"Go around and ask all your neighbors for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side."

The woman gathered empty jars and began to fill them from her one small jar of oil. She continued to fill the jars until each one she collected was full; "Then the oil stopped flowing" (2 Kings 4:6). The woman was able to sell the oil and pay her debt.

Notice that the oil stopped flowing as soon as the last jar was full. If the woman would have collected half as many jars, the oil would have stopped flowing when the collected jars were filled. And if she would have collected twice as many jars, the oil would have continued until every last one was full. God's provision was equal to the number of jars she collected - equal to the number of jars she believed God would fill.

In our limited understanding of God, we often place artificial restrictions on what we think He can accomplish; our prayers become reduced to what we believe is actually possible. We may rejoice when our small prayers are answered, but our level of faith has limited what God provides. Peter never would have stepped out of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus if confined to the realm of his own understanding.

Please do not read this message as a formula for worldly prosperity! God's Word never teaches that we are all to be rich with material wealth (this is an ugly distortion of His truth). But God desires for each of us to trust Him beyond the bounds of our best analysis, and to draw closer than what we believe is ever possible. Peter didn't need to understand how the atomic structure of water might be altered to provide stability, he simply needed to know with certainty that Jesus was calling; "Lord, if it's You, tell me to come to You on the water" (Matthew 14:28).

We serve an Awesome God - more awesome than we will ever comprehend; "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9). We must never believe there's a problem too big for God to handle; "He is able to do immeasurably more..." (Ephesians 3:20). Let's pray with a faith that truly believes our Father is the Creator of the Universe, and let's refuse to place limits on God's provision.

Have A Great Day!

A Complete Cure

7-25-06

In the message "God's Provision" we saw that our limited faith often restricts our prayers and therefore limits what God accomplishes in our life. Many times we fail to even ask because we're fearful of a negative response; "You do not have, because you do not ask God" (James 4:2). And then there are times when God answers, but our limited faith refuses to accept His solution and we never take the necessary steps to follow His direction.

Naaman was the army commander of a kingdom northeast of Israel. He was a very successful soldier, but he had been afflicted with leprosy. At the suggestion of one of his servant girls, Naaman traveled to the home of the prophet Elisha so he might be cured.

2 Kings 5:10-12

"Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, 'Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.' But Naaman went away angry and said, 'I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. Are not the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?' So he turned and went off in a rage."

Naaman was an important and proud man. He was offended when Elisha sent a messenger who told him to wash in the dirty Jordan! Naaman thought he'd wasted his time, but one of his servants stated a simple, but profound, truth: "If the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed!'" (2 Kings 5:13).

Naaman made the decision to obey. He dipped himself seven times in the Jordan river and came out of the water completely cured.

How often does our limited faith or pride keep us from being "cured"? We ask God to heal the broken areas of our life, and He says; "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength" (Mark 12:30). But in our abundance of "wisdom," we conclude there must be more - some "great thing" which will heal or give our life meaning. We pray again, and God simply replies; "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5).

Today we will make a choice. We will choose our own path, which allows our "disease" to spread, or we will put aside our pride, follow God's direction and be cleansed. True healing can only begin with the free gift of forgiveness through faith in Jesus. A life of purpose can only be found as we seek to glorify God in all we do. Let's receive His gift and live a life of loving obedience as we trust Him with ALL our heart. Let's praise Him with every step and receive a complete cure.

Have A Great Day!

Open Our Eyes

7-26-06

The king of Aram was at war with Israel; but every time he moved his army, the prophet Elisha would inform the Israelites. The king concluded the only way to win the war was to first eliminate Elisha: "Go, find out where he is,' the king ordered, 'so I can send men and capture him'" (2 Kings 6:13).

When the king found where Elisha was staying, he sent his army to surround the city. When Elisha's servant woke and saw the army, he became very frightened; "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" (2 Kings 6:15). But Elisha comforted his servant by helping him see the real battle.

2 Kings 6:16-17

"Don't be afraid,' the prophet answered. 'Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.' And Elisha prayed, 'O Lord, open his eyes so he may see.' Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha."

Our false perception is the biggest cause of fear and frustration; in fact, I might boldly say it's the only cause! If we live without faith, our perception is restricted to what we see with our eyes and hear with our ears. With this limited input, it's no wonder so many live in fear - it's no wonder so many become frustrated and discouraged with their day to day life. But as our faith and understanding of God increase, we are able to trust in what we cannot physically see and hear. We can live in peace, knowing that "the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

Battles occur in and around us every day - battles which cause us to become heavily burdened. We desire to walk down God's path, but the pulls and attacks of the world seem relentless. We need to remember that His plan and provision is always perfect - always working toward the good. Somehow we must understand that the battle we see with our physical eyes and analyze with our mind is never the real battle; "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood" (Ephesians 6:12).

Our spouse, parents, children, or co-workers are not the enemy - neither is our church, the government, the economy, or our health. These temporal things are not the true cause of our pain nor should they ever become the source of our joy. The real battles are always spiritual...and we're NEVER alone!

Let's draw ever nearer to God until we gain a true understanding of how much He loves us - and how much He is fighting for us; "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Jesus Christ has already won the ultimate battle! We must now trust Him and give Him more of our heart.

Heavenly Father, we desire to see You clearly and joyfully walk without fear. We pray that You draw us into Your presence...and open our eyes!

Have A Great Day!

Debt of Love

7-27-06

Much of Paul's letter to the Romans is a love story between a righteous God and sinful man. Even though our sinful state sentenced us to an eternal death (Romans 6:23), God looked upon us with love: "But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

God loved us long before we knew Him - He loved us when there was nothing in us that deserved His love - and He gave us Jesus as a sacrifice for our sin so that, through faith, we might experience His deep and wonderful love for all eternity. This is a love I don't think we fully appreciate or even understand. And yet, we are called to hold this love as the standard for how we love others; "As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34).

The entire life of Jesus was an act of love made possible through the love of the Father and the power of the Holy Spirit. John wrote that "Through Him {Jesus} all things were made" (John 1:3). But we also know that the Creator of the Universe "made Himself nothing...being made in human likeness" (Philippians 2:7). Jesus Christ came to earth in human form; He "humbled Himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:8). And this is the same love He commands us to have for one another; the love which Paul says we must continually repay.

Romans 13:8

"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another."

Paul knew the fullness of Jesus' love and he knew we were commanded to love one another in a like manner. He also knew we could never truly fulfill Jesus' command of love - His love was simply too great. And though the love involved in our Salvation is beyond comprehension, His love continues even more with the gift of His Spirit for daily guidance and strength. We definitely have a large love-debt!

But notice that our debt of love to Jesus has become a debt of love to others - a "continuing debt" which will be with us for the rest of our life. Though we can never fully repay, we can honor Jesus' command by welcoming our debt and joyfully loving those who are placed in our path; "We love {others} because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Honoring the command of Jesus doesn't mean we love just the loveable or those who love us in return - it means we love...and then we love some more! Let's accept our debt and love one another as we make regular (daily) payments toward our continuing debt of love.

Have A Great Day!

John 6:1-4 - Lesson #59
7-28-06

The feeding of the five thousand was the fourth miracle, or sign (John 2:11), recorded in the gospel of John which Jesus did to show He was the Son of God. It is also the only miracle, other than the resurrection, to be recorded in all four gospels. This may be an indication of the importance of the event, but it should also challenge us to consider the other gospels to obtain a complete picture of this mighty work of God.

John 6:1-4

"After these things Jesus went over the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. Then a great multitude followed Him, because they saw His signs which He performed on those who were diseased. And Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat with His disciples. Now the Passover, a feast of the Jews, was near."

The fact that "the Passover, a feast of the Jews, was near" says that this event was several months - possibly as much as a year - after the events recorded in chapter five. Jesus had sent His twelve disciples out to minister into the area west of the Sea of Galilee; "So they departed and went through the towns, preaching the gospel and healing everywhere" (Luke 9:6).

When the disciples returned, they were eager to report on their active ministry; "Then the apostles gathered to Jesus and told Him all things, both what they had done and what they had taught" (Mark 6:30). But they also had to bring Jesus the bad news that John the Baptist had been beheaded by King Herod; "Then his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and went and told Jesus" (Matthew 14:12).

It was immediately after receiving the ministry report and the news about John that Jesus said, "Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while" (Mark 6:31). The deserted place was on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, "a deserted place belonging to the city called Bethsaida" (Luke 9:10). This is most likely the area known today as the Golan Heights.

Jesus needed a time of quiet, and He also knew His disciples were in great need of some time alone. But many who were on the road for the Passover feast had now heard of the Great Miracle Worker and quickly followed Him to the mountainside. These were not truth seekers who desired to repent, but thrill seekers looking for a show - looking to be entertained.

In our next lesson we will see how Jesus taught on the need for practical application of Spiritual truth, but let's not miss the important message in the priority of His actions - Jesus consistently sought and encouraged time alone. Whether we are in the middle of great Spiritual victories or needing to grieve and process difficult news, we must have time to simply sit at His feet. Interruptions will always follow, but let's be determined to withdraw for times of rest. Let's never surrender our quiet time of being alone with the Lord.

Have A Great Day!

As Jesus Loved

7-31-06

In the message "Debt of Love" we saw that God loved us long before we ever knew Him, and loved us far more than we deserved; "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Our Heavenly Father sent His Son to die for the forgiveness of our sins "that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). And He sent His Spirit to comfort, guide, and strengthen us all the rest of our days.

God's love has created a debt we can never fully repay, but it's a debt of love we now honor by loving others; "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another" (Romans 13:8). As we reach out to those around us, we are actually reaching up and loving our Heavenly Father; "He will not forget your work and the love you have shown Him as you have helped His people" (Hebrews 6:10). We know we should love one another, but what is the proper expression of our love?

Jesus had gathered with His disciples for what would be their last meal together. While they were eating in the upper room, Jesus "showed them the full extent of His love" (John 13:1).

John 13:4-5

"He got up from the meal, took off His outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around His waist. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash His disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around Him."

In this, His clear demonstration of love, the Creator of the Universe lowered Himself to the position of a common house servant and washed the feet of His disciples. His example of love was completely void of pride; there was no task too small or service too "low" for Jesus to perform. Only moments later Jesus told His disciples; "As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34).

Jesus was able to love with true humility and self-sacrifice because He was absolutely secure in His Heavenly relationship; "Jesus knew He had come from God and was returning to God" (John 13:3). Jesus knew who He was and where He was going; His self-esteem was independent of feedback from the world - independent of any appreciation He may have received in return. Jesus was sent to love, so He loved!

We are now sent to love with this same servant's heart - a heart that simply considers the needs of others and then reaches out to "take care of My sheep" (John 21:16). Let's secure our Heavenly relationship through faith in the sacrifice of Jesus and then live each day with a humble heart that only His security allows. Let's love our Heavenly Father as we reach out to the world and love as Jesus loved.

Have A Great Day!