

RESTING IN THE REFINER'S FIRE

Matthew John Silverman's Reflections on Christian
Courage and Perseverance In Pain and Suffering

Part One of a Three Part Series of Christian Sermons and Devotions

by

Dr. Matthew John Silverman

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	i
FOREWORD.....	ii
LIFE BIOGRAPHY.....	iii
MY CHRISTIAN WALK: A TESTIMONY BY MATT SILVERMAN.....	1
SUFFERING AND PERSECUTION SERMON.....	3
WHEN SUFFERING BRINGS SALVATION DEVOTIONAL	5
ONLY DEATH AWAITS.....	7
THE BATTLE AHEAD: DECEMBER 26, 2021, SERMON.....	9
THE PHILLIPIANS 1 DILEMMA.....	13
GOD OF THE HILLS AND VALLEYS DEVOTIONAL, AUGUST 2022.....	17
THE STORY OF RUTH.....	19
IN GOD’S HANDS SERMON	21
AND NOW IT STARTS SERMON	27
SEEING THE UNSEEN DEVOTIONAL	35
MATT SILVERMAN TESTIMONY.....	37
THE SCARS OF JESUS SERMON.....	38
STRENGTH AND COURAGE: JOSHUA DEVOTIONAL	44
JOINING THE RIGHT SIDE: JOSHUA DEVOTIONAL.....	46
THE SCARS THAT STILL REMAIN	48
HOPE IN DARK TIMES DEVOTIONAL.....	51
IT’S A HARD KNOCK LIFE: DEVOTIONAL BY MATT AND LARA SILVERMAN.....	53
REAL AND LASTING JOY.....	55
THE SOUND OF WORSHIP: DEVOTIONAL BY MATT AND LARA SILVERMAN.....	56
PROMISE OF VICTORY SERMON	58
PURSUIT OF VICTORY SERMON	65
TURN YOUR TEST INTO A TESTIMONY.....	70
A DYING BREATH	76
THE STORY OF EASTER.....	80
I DIDN’T SIGN UP FOR THIS	92
MATTHEW JOHN SILVERMAN’S FINAL WORDS TO HIS CHURCH YOUTH GROUP	95
PLEASE CONTRIBUTE TO MATT’S FAVORITE CAUSES	96

DEDICATION

Dedicated to our sweet and brilliant Matthew John Silverman, with our undying love

From Lara Silverman, your beloved wife, and Joel Silverman and Anna Silverman, your loving and devoted parents

**Matthew's sermons and devotions listed in this volume are not necessarily in chronological order, with some being written before his second cancer, and some during. Where the original date of writing is known, it is included.*

****With special thanks to our loving friends and family, including Ann Karagozian Sarafian, Caroline Sagherian, Sona Bekmezian, and Joey Sarafian for invaluable assistance in the final round of the editing process of Matthew's many works*

FOREWORD

This book contains Part One of the beautiful Christian writings of our beloved Matthew Silverman, whose dedication to the Lord and the church shone brightly in all he did. Part One focuses on how Christians must endure and persevere through suffering in light of Christ's ultimate victory over death through His resurrection. Despite facing cancer twice throughout his life, Matthew did not fear death but instead chose to continually "rest in the Refiner's fire." Matt trusted in God's love and sovereignty in all circumstances, even when placed right in the center of the fiery furnace of suffering.

We encourage you to consider, meditate, and pray over the Biblical wisdom and principles in these works. Matthew's greatest hope was that these Christian sermons and devotions would bring the listener or reader into a closer, life-giving relationship with the risen Christ. May God bless Matt's extraordinary legacy through these writings and powerfully impact many lives while advancing God's kingdom.

LIFE BIOGRAPHY

Matthew John Silverman's Life and Christian Work

Matthew John Silverman, a faithful servant of the Lord whose Christian impact was manifested in Armenian Evangelical churches in San Francisco and Los Angeles, at Camp Arev, and in missions work in Haiti and Vietnam, passed away at the age of forty on June 10, 2024, after a three-year battle with intestinal cancer.

Matt was born in Mountain View, California, on October 16, 1983, to parents Joel and Anna (Sarafian) Silverman. He was the oldest of three children in the family, which grew to include brother Jeffrey and sister Lauren. Matt was a light in the eyes of his grandmother, Arshalous Sarafian, grandparents Millie and Herman Silverman, and Godparents Arpi and George Banerian. Matt attended Bubbs Elementary, Graham Middle School, and Mountain View High School. He was an exceptional student, excelling in math and science in particular.

As a freshman in high school, Matt was diagnosed with stage 4 non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. He underwent a year of chemotherapy while still attending classes, not willing to give up any of his Advanced Placement courses. Members of his grandmother Arshalous's church, Calvary Armenian Congregational Church, prayed faithfully for his healing. After a year of surgeries, chemo, and great pain, Matt was said to be cured of this cancer. He excelled in his high school classes, played the flute in the Marching Band, and even achieved the Eagle Scout rank. He was an amazingly gifted and resilient young man.

Matt began college at UCLA in 2002, majoring in Chemical Engineering and playing flute in the UCLA Marching Band. He began attending the United Armenian Congregational Church with his Sarafian cousins and soon participated regularly in Bible Studies and youth activities. Matt was not shy about asking tough questions and delving deeply into Scripture. While his intellectual knowledge of Scripture grew, Matt realized during his second year of college at a Camp Arev retreat that "any plan God had for my life would be a better plan than anything I could come up with on my own, and it was time to face the reality that this God was real and was in control." Then and there, Matt accepted Jesus as his Savior and prayed a prayer of faith.

As Matt later shared in his testimony, everything changed from that moment on. While he continued to pursue his education at UCLA, doing well and eventually earning B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees in Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering, his real focus was on serving the Lord and sharing the Gospel. He joined Christian groups at UCLA, primarily Chi Alpha, a missions-oriented ministry. At UACC, Matt began teaching Sunday School with his cousin, Joey Sarafian, and was elected to the church's Board of Christian Education. He led an after-school tutoring program at UACC, outreach activities to serve the homeless in Skid Row, and Christian revival events.

Faithfully, Matt served as a counselor at Camp Arev each summer and winter for over fifteen years. His fruitful ministry in Los Angeles reached countless children and young adults for the Lord. His ministry with Chi Alpha led to his taking numerous mission trips to poverty-stricken Haiti and Vietnam, where he regularly preached to hundreds of people while helping to meet their physical needs.

Matt received his Ph.D. in 2014, publishing his dissertation on PET imaging to detect pancreatic cancer. He returned to the Bay Area and was hired at San Francisco State University to teach Clinical Laboratory Science in the Medical Diagnostics graduate program. He helped train hundreds of graduates working in hospitals all over California. His many gifts in teaching were appreciated by countless students and colleagues over the years.

Upon his return to the Bay Area, Matt joined his beloved grandmother's church, Calvary Armenian Congregational Church. With the encouragement of then-CACC pastor, Rev. Nerses Balabanian, Matt began serving as the church's volunteer youth pastor. As a direct result of his engaging devotional programs and leadership, Matt drew in scores of teens and their families to the CACC community, growing the youth group from three to forty kids in ten years. The youth of CACC adored Matthew for his caring and compassionate disposition; he was "always just a phone call away" for them.

CACC also regularly called upon Matt to preach, and his enriching sermons encouraged others to grow closer to Christ, with novel and unique examples that were often science-based. When the COVID pandemic hit, Matt provided online updates on the science behind the disease and its treatment, answering questions and calming fears while encouraging his audience to trust the Lord with their future. He also recorded dozens of Christian devotional messages on YouTube, bringing deep spiritual insights to youth and adults alike.

In May 2021, Matt was diagnosed with a very rare form of intestinal cancer, at stage 4. He immediately began researching experimental treatments and clinical trials while enduring chemotherapy for the second time in his young life. But even amidst his great pain and weakness, Matt continued to serve as CACC youth pastor and periodically preach sermons. During this time, as a CACC Deacon, Matt started to visit a young lady from church, Lara Palanjian, who was suffering from her own severe illness. The two rapidly fell in love, discussing theological topics for hours and comforting each other about persevering in suffering. The two wed on March 4, 2023, with a wedding theme focusing on the latter part of Isaiah 43:20, "I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen." Matt and Lara's story was indeed a God-designed love story.

After they were married, Matt and Lara lived in their Daly City home, where they spent as much time as possible enjoying and encouraging one another amidst their pain. They started a YouTube

channel called “The Silverman Show,” which became a platform for sharing spiritual ideas in addition to Lara and Matt’s musical and comedy skits and performances. The couple celebrated their first wedding anniversary at CACC with friends and family, using it to raise support for one of Matt’s favorite charities, Impactful Missions, which is seeking to build a school in Haiti. Matt and Lara also performed for their guests, playing flute and violin. It was a unique and memorable evening, raising \$13,000 for the Haiti mission.

Not long after their anniversary celebration, and after a painful three-year battle with cancer, no hope for successful treatment, and many challenges in even being able to eat or drink, Matthew Silverman made the brave decision to enter hospice. He and Lara stayed at his parents’ home in Mountain View, under the loving care of his parents and devoted brother and sister, who left their “normal” lives to be with Matt around the clock.

Matt’s last nine weeks of life during hospice were as impactful for the Lord as any before then. He met personally with family and friends, including many who traveled from around the country to be with him one last time. There were songs of praise and comfort that encouraged everyone. He held one last impactful session with his beloved CACC youth group, encouraging them to remain connected to Jesus as the True Vine. Matt told them, “Do not let things like death scare you. Death is the victory and ultimate reward for the Christian.” Despite his great pain, Matt’s last days were dedicated wholly to the Lord and his family.

On June 10, 2024, surrounded by his loving family, Matthew Silverman entered eternity with his Savior. Matt is survived by his parents, Anna and Joel Silverman, brother Jeff, sister Lauren and her husband, Simon Margolis, nieces Addison and Emma, and his adoring wife, Lara. A meaningful and emotional memorial service was held for Matt on July 13, 2024 at the Calvary Armenian Congregational Church in San Francisco, and the link to the video can be found here: [Full Memorial Service For Matt Silverman, July 13, 2024](#). A separate memorial service was held at Camp Arev on July 27, 2024, for close family members.

Matthew’s final wish was to continue to serve God through others’ donations in his memory to any of the following organizations: Calvary Armenian Congregational Church in San Francisco and his two missionary groups: Impactful Missions and Hope Beyond Borders. Contributions in Matt’s memory to the Camp Arev Campership Fund to benefit young campers with financial needs are also much appreciated. Of Matt, we can surely say, “Well done, good and faithful servant...enter into the joy of your Master” (Matthew 25:21).

MY CHRISTIAN WALK: A TESTIMONY BY MATT SILVERMAN

Originally published on April 27, 2024, while in Hospice

Romans 8:38-39:

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

I was twenty years old, in my second year studying Chemical Engineering at UCLA, when these simple verses changed my life. Up to this point, my education was probably the most significant focus in my life. I was used to being the smart one in the class, used to having the answers to all the questions, and life was pretty good. Even after going through non-Hodgkin's lymphoma at the age of fifteen, I'd say I had my life pretty well together. A prestigious degree from a prestigious university...what more could someone ask for?

I had started going to church on Sundays with my cousins, not really out of a great interest in God as much as something to do to hang out with my cousins. Yet, as I started attending, I couldn't help but notice there was something more, something more than good grades and admiration from people. The people at church...they had something...it was something real...something I hadn't experienced before. I got interested in studying the Bible intellectually; there was wisdom and knowledge that I had never seen. Perhaps I had some glimpses of it, occasionally being taken to church by my grandmother as a kid or going to a week-long bible camp here or there in elementary school, but this was something more...something tangible.

I took advantage of it, joining Bible study groups, asking questions, challenging the teachers, and seeking answers. But the more I asked, the more my curiosity grew. Was this Jesus person real? Did he really perform miracles? Did he really rise from the dead? Then came the opportunity...a weekend college getaway where we could just focus on learning about the Bible and asking questions about it. No shallow, 4th-grade level answers. Instead, real, in-depth discussions. That weekend, he transformed me. I'll never forget the weekend's theme: the power of prayer. We looked at the book of James and talked about what it meant to make a genuine prayer of faith, to pray and believe God was going to respond. As we studied these Bible passages, I realized I didn't have that faith—but if I prayed for it, God would answer and give me the faith. I realized it wasn't my intellectual doubts getting in my way of true prayer but rather my pride. I had a pretty good life going for me: a great career path and admiration from the people around me. I wasn't interested in giving up my life to follow some God who might send me halfway around the world to serve some random people I never met before.

But as I read my Bible that night, I came across Romans 8:38-39, and I realized any plan God had for my life would be a better plan than anything I could come up with on my own and that it was time to face the reality that this God was real and was in control. So, in humility, I prayed a simple prayer: “God, give me the faith to make a prayer of faith.”

In that moment, everything changed. It was like a wrecking ball crashed through some unseen wall in my heart, and the very following words I heard was someone in the room behind me reading out loud those very same words in Romans 8:38-39. My life changed coming down from that mountain. My priorities were now about serving this God who rescued me, the God who came down to earth to pay the price for our sins, who died the death of the cross so that we would have eternal life. To top it off, I’ve even traveled to Haiti almost a dozen times, serving the poorest people in the Western Hemisphere, and I wouldn’t change it for anything.

As I find myself now (alongside my beautiful wife) counting down my final days at the age of forty—dying from terminal intestinal cancer—I’m grateful that God has blessed me with twenty years of fruitful ministry, two decades of opportunities to impact lives, countless relationships to encourage me along the way, and most importantly the knowledge that this salvation Jesus offers can never be taken away. No power of hell, no crafty scheme of any human, can ever take away the perfect gifts of God, and I go home now to a rest that is sweeter than the greatest treasures this world has to offer. I have Heaven, where there will be no more sickness, pain, or death, and I can spend all my days with my God, who loved me to death.

SUFFERING AND PERSECUTION SERMON

Delivered In Haiti, 2016

It is so good to be worshipping with you today. The world can be filled with danger, but there is great joy when we come together to worship God. For those who don't know me, my name is Matt. I've been friends with Pastor Winston's team for many years and have been coming with them to Haiti for many years. I don't get to go often because I have much work back home. I teach at a university, and I also teach at my church. At church, I primarily teach the young people. It's been a very difficult year for many of them. There has been a lot of danger and confusion. Because of that, I decided to teach them about the book of Acts. Acts is filled with many stories of danger and adventure. It follows the story of the apostles after Jesus rose from the dead and returned to heaven. The apostles faced many difficulties, but God was always guiding them. So today, I want to talk about one of Paul's adventures in a city called Philippi. Let's read Acts 16:16-24.

Paul and his friends have been telling people about Jesus around the city. Eventually, they meet a little girl possessed by an evil spirit. The spirit caused her to predict the future. At first, maybe this sounds like a good thing. I want to predict the future. If I know what will happen, I can prepare for it. Unfortunately, evil men were keeping this child as an enslaved person. They would make money off her. She has something that looks like a good gift, but it keeps her enslaved. Satan does this to us sometimes. He gives us something that looks good but keeps us an enslaved person. Paul sees this and gets upset. He doesn't like seeing this girl trapped as an enslaved person. So he heals her and sets her free.

This is the power of Jesus to set us free. It doesn't matter what controls us; God can set us free. Jesus says that anyone who sins is a slave to sin. Sin is controlling us. But if the Son sets you free, you will be free. Some people are slaves to anger. They are controlled by hatred. They can't find peace. Some people are slaves to greed. They always want to take. Some people are slaves to alcohol. They are always drinking. Other people abandon their families to chase after other relationships. They are trapped by immorality. But Jesus can set us free. People are not happy when they are free. When we are free, they can't make money from us anymore. In the story, men are not satisfied that the girl is free. They get angry at Paul. They get a whole crowd together and have him arrested. Paul was innocent. He committed no crime. But he was beaten and thrown into prison anyway. But the story isn't over. Let's see the end. Read Acts 16:25-40.

We learn something interesting in this story. Paul was a Roman citizen. If you are a Roman citizen, you have special rights. People are not allowed to put you in prison without a trial. But, interestingly, Paul doesn't mention this in the beginning. He could've avoided jail by saying he was a Roman citizen. But he stays quiet. Why does he do this? Paul is encouraging each of us. We will be persecuted for being Christian. People will be angry at us when we set others free. But

remember that Paul went through the same persecutions. He could praise God even when he was in jail. We can praise God also. Jesus faced all the same difficulties we are facing now. And he will strengthen us through them.

In our story, we see that Paul isn't done saving people yet. There is a big earthquake. The jail breaks. All the prisoners have the chance to run away. The guard is terrified. If any prisoner escapes, he would be killed. He would experience great shame. He would be humiliated. He would rather kill himself right there. Paul could stay quiet and let the guard kill himself. Then Paul could escape. But Paul calls out to him and saves him. Because Paul was willing to suffer in prison, he was able to save this man and his entire family. If it wasn't for Paul, everyone would have run away after the earthquake, and the guard would've killed himself. But Paul was willing to suffer, and many people were saved. We will all suffer as Christians. People will mock us. People will attack us. But always remember that our suffering can bring salvation to other people.

When I was a child, I experienced much suffering. When I was fifteen, I came down with cancer and almost died. Even now, my body is still in pain sometimes. But because of my suffering, I was able to help more people. My suffering brought me closer to God. Because of this, I have great joy. I will go through it again if my suffering can get more people to God. If one more person can be saved because of my suffering, I am happy to go through it. So don't be discouraged because of suffering and persecution. One day, we will all be together in heaven, and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. We will see all the people who came to Jesus because of our hardships. And we will have great joy. And we will hear the most significant words we could ever imagine from Jesus. "Well done, good and faithful servant. Come join your master's happiness." Amen.

WHEN SUFFERING BRINGS SALVATION DEVOTIONAL

Originally published on June 23, 2021

At the end of the book of Genesis, Joseph responds as Joseph's brothers approach him, worried he will hold a grudge for their mistreatment of him in the past. He says "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." Genesis 50:19-20.

It is a story of tragedy and conflict turning into triumph and reconciliation. It is a powerful reminder that God can use even the most hopeless situations to bring salvation to many. And at the end of the day, that's what it's all about. The pain, hardships, and uncertainties we face aren't the end.

We're looking forward to a future promise, a greater purpose worked out by God.

The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 8:18, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." And again in 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Paul was no stranger to suffering. Look at the list he gives us in 2 Corinthians chapter 11: imprisonments, countless beatings, almost killed, being shipwrecked three times, even spending a day adrift at sea. Nights without sleep, days without food or water. Even sickness. Paul makes an interesting comment in his letter to the Galatians; he reminds them that he went to Galatia in the first place because of some illness he had. We don't know its whole story, but it sounds like it had something to do with his eyes. Maybe it was some eye pain, or he was losing his vision. Whatever it was, it sounded like it was something rather unpleasant. But we know Paul was a guy who was doing miracles all over the place, so why can't he heal this illness he has? Yet sometime later, we see him write in 2 Corinthians 12:

In order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10 That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

I sometimes wonder if this thorn Paul talks about here is the same illness he talks about to the Galatians. It was suffering that he didn't want in life, and he asked God several times to take it away. But in the end, he accepted that it was part of God's plan. And you know what, it's ok for us to do the same thing. It's ok to ask God to take our suffering away, and it's ok to be sad or confused when God doesn't answer our prayers as we were hoping. Paul had those kinds of

moments, and I'm sure Joseph did too in those years he spent as an enslaved person and in prison. Even Jesus prayed three times for his suffering to be taken away from him the night before he was crucified.

But even during those times, we can take comfort in knowing that God hasn't forgotten us. We might not always see the purpose behind our suffering as Paul and Joseph did, but faith allows us to press forward through the pain. Paul gives us an interesting take on his suffering in Colossians 1:24: "Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church."

This seems strange at first. We know Jesus' afflictions, the pain he endured on the cross, brought us complete and total salvation. The work is done; there's nothing more we need to do to earn salvation, so why does Paul say he needs to fill up something lacking regarding Jesus' afflictions? It's because he understands that part of partnering with God in advancing the gospel is also suffering along with Jesus. Jesus may have paid the price for our salvation, but He's given us the message to carry out to the world. There may be suffering as we toil alongside God, but there's also great joy as we see lives saved and transformed. The suffering that brought Paul to Galatia and the suffering that brought Joseph to Egypt was matched by the great pleasure of seeing many lives saved.

I know we were all disappointed last week when we found out about my diagnosis of cancer. Many people said it doesn't feel fair; why do I have to have cancer again when I've already had it before? And I know this season will be one with much pain and hardships. But it can also be one with joy and peace. It can also be one with hope and love. I don't know what God will be doing during this time, but I do know that as we seek Him, He will fill us with a greater portion of his spirit and empower us to do more things than we ever thought we could. And we'll also be there for each other and help each other through this time. In the meantime, being angry, upset, or confused is okay. It's ok to cry out to God and ask why; believe me, He gets that question a lot. But as we wrap up our series on Joseph, I want to leave us with some encouraging verses:

1 Corinthians 16:3 - Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong.

Psalms 31:24 - Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the Lord.

Isaiah 41:10 - So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Deuteronomy 31:6 - Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.

Even if things are difficult, I hope you all have a week filled with joy and peace.

ONLY DEATH AWAITS

Originally published on Medium on April 14, 2017

Luke 22:41-44:

“He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, ‘Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.’ An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.”

It was the end of a long journey. It is a journey full of laughter, sorrow, frustration, joy, hope, disappointment, and many sermons and parables—the end and the beginning of something new. We tend to see death as the end. It’s only natural, of course. After someone dies, they typically stop talking to or spending time with us. In their absence, it feels like we’ll never see them again. Then there’s the fear. What happens when we die? What lies on the other side? Do I ...cease to be...? Will I know I’m dead?

I’m sure Jesus didn’t have many of those fears or questions; he seemed to have a pretty good handle on what would happen next. He clearly explained to his disciples that he would prepare a place for them where he was going. He was returning to the Father; there was no question about that. But even knowing the outcome, his final destination, if you will, he wasn’t looking forward to the journey. The pain of watching your closest friends desert you. The pain of whips and thorns and nails, insults, and jeers...seeing your children, really, the people you created with love, laughing at you as the life slowly drains from your body over the course of several hours.

We will all face death at some point. Probably not one as gruesome as Jesus’ death, but regardless, it’s a moment most people aren’t looking forward to. When you think about it, it’s pretty ironic that the one thing most certain in our lives is the thing we usually least like dwelling on. We immerse ourselves in pleasures, entertainment, work, and anything else we can find to take our minds off it. There’s an interesting little line about that in Ecclesiastes 7:2: “It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart.”

Death is the destiny...but not the end. Sometimes, I have fun conversations with people about how we can know what happens after we die. Of course, the afterlife isn’t something we can observe ourselves. We can’t measure it, peek into it, or study it. What do we need? We need someone who’s been there. Someone who has been dead and comes back to tell us what it’s like.

Ah, but can you trust those stories from people who say they were in heaven for twenty or thirty minutes? Maybe they were hallucinating or dreaming. No...we need someone dead. Dead for a few days. Stabbed through the heart, bled out, cold, stiff, wrapped up, and buried...that dead. Right? Preferably someone who seemed reliable while he was alive, someone who demonstrated true

power and knowledge. Someone you knew would always speak the truth, even if it ticked everybody off. If someone like that came back to life, walking around and talking with people, telling people what would happen to us after we die...that would be the person worth listening to. Especially if, after he came back to life, none of his followers were afraid of death anymore. It was almost as if everyone who knew this guy suddenly lost all fear of what awaited them on the other side of this life after he came back to life and told them about it.

Today, we commemorate the death of the one person ever to walk the earth that could reliably fit that description. The one person who, knowing full well what was about to happen, told his followers ahead of time what to expect. Someone who didn't need to suffer for anything, but considered us each valuable enough to suffer for.

And Sunday, we will commemorate his resurrection.

Good Friday and Easter are times to ask yourself, "What do I really believe?" What are you investing your life in? When the sun explodes and destroys the solar system in a few billion years, what will be left of everything you've done? Where will you be? Is there anything that can give you hope, looking at such a future? The future we know will be?

Romans 5:6-8 says, "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the unGodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

There is only one hope Jesus had to offer. Not wealth and prosperity, fame and fortune. And certainly not health and long life. The one hope Jesus left us with was the hope that we would come back to life just like he did. Not because we were good and deserved it, but because he already paid the price for it. This week is a chance for each of us to ask ourselves if that is really what our hope is in or if we instead look to the future in fear, thinking only death awaits...

THE BATTLE AHEAD: DECEMBER 26, 2021, SERMON
Calvary Armenian Congregational Church

Well, it's been quite a year—many twists and turns and many unexpected battles. I'm not going to lie; the past year has been rough. I've been doing much better than I should be, but it's still been hard: many days with pain, a lot of difficult nights, and many prayers asking God, "Does it need to be cancer? Again? And does it need to be now, when so much else is going on, with so many other challenges and difficulties? Isn't there a better time for something like this?"

Of course, I guess there isn't ever a good time for cancer. But we know that God's timing for everything is always perfect. And I've seen God's hand working in the midst of this. Many of you know that during the COVID pandemic, I have been writing articles and updates to help people keep up with the latest news, posting them on Facebook. And somehow, I attracted quite a following of hundreds of people following those updates.

Eventually I felt like I had covered everything worth covering, and I started praying and asking God what I should do next now that I had the attention of all these people interested in what I had to say. Then, sure enough, as we were finishing up our Joseph series at church, and I was putting together a video on how God takes things meant for evil and uses them for good, this diagnosis comes. And now, all these people that I've never met in person—both Christians and non-Christians—are following me through this battle.

I've had a lot of messages and notes from people who have been moved by watching me go through this, saying their faith had been strengthened seeing me go through this ordeal. I've been putting short devotionals up on Facebook and putting together those YouTube videos for our youth group. Total strangers tell me they're enjoying them and thanking me for making them.

How do we handle a crisis when it comes? I want us to look at King Jehoshaphat and the most significant crisis in his reign. In 2 Chronicles chapter 20, three nations team up to attack Judah: Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir. Three armies and Judah doesn't stand a chance. They're outnumbered and have no one to call in for backup. So, Jehoshaphat brings all the leaders of Judah together to pray to God for deliverance from this impossible situation. Listen to what God says in response:

"Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the LORD says to you: 'Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's. Tomorrow march down against them. They will be climbing up by the Pass of Ziz, and you will find them at the end of the gorge in the Desert of Jeruel. You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you, Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the LORD will be with you.'"

So Jehoshaphat listens and goes out with his army into an impossible battle, and all he knows is that God has promised to fight for them. Often, when we find ourselves in a crisis, that's all we have to go on. We can't win it ourselves. All we can do is trust in God. What's particularly interesting is how Jehoshaphat sets up his formation. In the front of the army, he puts the singers, and they're singing, "Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever."

I think there's something very significant in that. We usually don't get to choose the armies we go up against, and we typically don't get to select the day of the battle. But we do get to choose whether we walk into it worshiping: whether we put our fears first or our worship first.

Jehoshaphat decides to walk into this impossible battle with his worship up-front, not knowing what God plans to do. Sometimes, that's all we need to do: trust Him! I've had many days these past months where I don't know what to do, so I play some worship songs on my computer, listen to them, reflect on them, and focus on the greatness of God in the struggle. And having just that quiet time of prayer and worship is powerful.

I don't think we know precisely which psalm they were singing as they went into battle because the line "Give thanks to the LORD, for his steadfast love endures forever" appears in a few different psalms. But it might have been something like Psalm 136, which lists all the miracles God had performed for the Israelites in the past: rescuing them from Egypt, defeating the enemy nations as they came to the promised land—one by one, listing the miracles God had done.

We need to do the same thing in our worship, singing and reminding ourselves of all the times God has come through for us. And during this time, I've been remembering all the times God had come through for me in the past: That time when I had lymphoma and I developed that infection — and the doctors were arguing with each other over whether I would die from cancer or die from the infection — I won that argument, I guess! And that time during my PhD studies when it looked like there was no way forward, but God somehow opened up new doors that ultimately led to a project that had enormous implications for cancer diagnosis and treatment. It might even apply to this cancer that I'm going through now! Something I'm looking into. Who knows, right? Those victories we had in the past encourage us in the battle today.

It was interesting: I was in the hospital for a few days at the beginning of the semester with a bit of intestinal obstruction, and while I was there, I got a visit from someone who I think was the chaplain (an emotional support type person, you know what I mean). He had heard about me from the doctor overseeing my treatment and was eager to meet me; I'm not sure why. We were chatting and sharing, and I was telling him stories about my first cancer, stories about Haiti, and my PhD research, and we were having a good time. At one point, I said, "Look, I know I'm not immortal. We're all going to face death someday, but I am very difficult to kill." The chaplain got a real kick out of that one. I read my hospital summary after my visit to see what they said about me, and I was quoted in the notes. Even in the hospital, I could share and encourage people.

Sometimes, God gives us the best opportunities in our incredible suffering and complex battles. We just need to be willing to take them.

And for Jehoshaphat, his battle was an opportunity, too. Sure enough, God delivered on his promise. They got to the battlefield just in time to see the three armies turn against each other and wipe each other out. I can just imagine how it started: a little joking, a little pushing, some insults, some escalation, fighting breaks out, and before long, these guys from different countries who might not even speak the same language are at each other's throats, killing each other. When all was said and done, no one was left to fight. God has a way of turning evil against itself.

Now, you might ask, "God, if you were going to defeat those armies so quickly, why did you wait so long?" Did you have to wait for the battle to come to our front door to act? I think sometimes Christians can get into this mindset that if we're doing the right thing, just being righteous and not sinning, that somehow we're going to be protected from the battles. God will bless me if I'm good enough, and I'll never have a crisis. The reality is (I think) it's more often the opposite that's true. We live in a world at war with God, and we have an enemy. Satan is always looking for a chance to bring us down, to stop the work God is doing. We need to remember that the battle can come to us at any time, and if you aren't prepared, you'll stumble. You know that fighting is usually decided before stepping onto the battlefield. Our preparation comes from prayer and worship and building our relationship with God so that when the day of battle comes, we have the strength to stand and fight.

I don't know why God sometimes delays. Maybe he's giving these three nations a chance to turn back peacefully. Maybe he's just sparing Jehoshaphat a long hike to someplace further away. But whatever the reason, God waits for these armies to get within a few miles of Jerusalem before he destroys them. The battle indeed belonged to the Lord. Victory was decided before anyone stepped out onto the battlefield.

One of the things I've noticed is that many people try to keep their battles and difficulties hidden. Many people in the body of Christ want everyone to think that everything is ok and that there aren't any problems. I think it goes back to that mindset that if I'm living a good life, then I won't have any problems; if people saw the crisis I'm going through, they'd think God is punishing me. They'd think less of me if they knew what I was really going through. And that's sad—when we do that, we deny ourselves the prayer support we get from those around us.

Jehoshaphat doesn't go into battle alone. He brings his army. And if we want to win the battle, we want to be going-in with an army too. I was blown away by how many people signed up for those prayer chains for me. I think I probably have a total of a few thousand people praying for me during this time, and from the early days when I first got this diagnosis, I've had this strong conviction that this illness will not end in death, and that the work isn't done yet. The more people who have told me they're praying for me, the stronger that conviction has gotten.

Actually, a couple of months ago, a friend of mine from one of our other churches came up to me. He had been praying for me, and God gave him a message to give to me. I won't go into all the details of it, but he isn't the kind of guy who would just make up something like this. One of the things he told me was that this was preparing me for some important work after this is done. Once this cancer is done with, I'll have an important assignment. Now, I'm a little worried about what this work is going to be, that this cancer is what I need to prepare for it. I'm thinking, "Can't there be something a little easier than this for preparation, Lord? Can't the preparation be something like, 'Just do a bunch of pushups, some weightlifting, you know, something like that?'" But sometimes, we must trust God that He's working out His purposes in us.

That's why we need other Christians to walk alongside us in the battle. We need people who have those words of encouragement; who maybe have some insight to share with us. And we also need to be people who are willing to do that sharing and encouragement for others. The hardest part of the past two years in COVID has really been how cut-off everyone has been from each other. We try to make up for it with Zoom and online meetings, and posting YouTube videos. But we all know there's something much more powerful when we can meet face to face, pray for each other, and encourage each other in person.

This season in my life has reminded me of what a large army I have behind me. And more than an army we can see, we know that there's an even greater army of angels behind us that we can't see. Sometimes, our prayer is just asking God to open our eyes to see that army behind us so that we'll have confidence for the day of battle. And as difficult as I know the battles up ahead will be, I know that we have an even greater army behind us that doesn't get tired, doesn't retreat, and won't be defeated. Whatever deadly dangers we face in this life, we know we serve the One who is our source of life—both here on earth and in eternity.

And for Jehoshaphat, this impossible battle was the last major crisis of his reign. After this battle, surprisingly, no one wants to fight Jehoshaphat anymore. All the nations around him decide it might be best to leave this guy alone. We might not always see the full implications of the victories we win (or see whether our victories impact people we'll never get to meet), but that doesn't change the fact that we can trust that God takes the things the enemy meant for evil and uses them for good. I probably won't know the full impact that fighting through this cancer will have, but I can still have faith that good things are coming out of it. And whatever battles we have in the future, we'll march into them with that faith.

THE PHILLIPIANS 1 DILEMMA

Originally published on Medium on March 6, 2022

During a perilous time of imprisonment for the Apostle Paul, when it looked like his life could be over very soon, he wrote a fascinating letter to the church in Philippi. Early in the letter, he contemplates the possibilities of surviving or dying in this situation:

Philippians 1:18-25: “Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God’s provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.”

I think it’s an important passage for us to reflect on whenever we face deadly situations. It’s a passage that has come up in many conversations I’ve had over the past ten months since I first got this cancer diagnosis. Paul highlights a crucial dynamic for the Christian. On the one hand, there’s a part of us eagerly looking forward to our reward in Heaven, finally united with the One who loved us enough to die for us.

On the other hand, we each have our important work here on earth to finish, and we don’t give up on it just because we hit a stretch of rocky road. Whether the peril is deadly or impossible, we remain until the work we were created to do is completed. Despite the hopelessness of his situation, Paul knew that he still had work to do on this earth, so it wasn’t his time to go quite yet.

Going into surgery this week, I think it’s a good time to look back on this last year and share some of the thoughts I’ve had throughout it. Most of you know this is my second time dealing with stage 4 cancer; the first time was when I was just fifteen with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. Treatment for that was a full year of chemotherapy, and after that, the cancer was completely gone. Doctors gave me a seventy-five percent chance of survival with my initial diagnosis back then, slightly better odds than we usually think of when we think of cancer.

So, on the one hand, a stage 4 cancer diagnosis doesn’t seem quite as impossible for me to beat having already gone through it once. However, this cancer is a little different. It’s a very rare form of small intestinal cancer, extremely aggressive and invasive. Generally, it doesn’t respond to chemotherapy, and people who are diagnosed with it in the condition I was in back in June

typically don't survive for very long. For me, it had already spread to three different places in my intestines, to some lymph nodes, and several other spots around my abdomen, which was too much spread to try to address with surgery. In fact, my first instinct when I saw the histology report before meeting with my oncologist was that I should start figuring out how to say goodbye to people. I was thinking about putting together some goodbye video and giving it to someone to hold on to in case things went south quickly.

Then, after a few days of that mindset, something changed. I can't really explain it; it wasn't some new medical data I came across or new information or even meeting with my oncologist ... I was just filled with a strong conviction that I wouldn't need to be worrying about goodbyes any time soon. I knew how impossible the odds were of surviving this cancer (my PhD was in cancer diagnostics, after all). It just didn't seem to matter anymore. It's the Philippians 1 principle; it was necessary for me to remain, so remain I shall. The more I found people praying for me worldwide, the stronger my conviction felt. Whatever happened, I wouldn't be needing that video.

And then I saw the hand of God working throughout treatment. Chemo treatment ended up being surprisingly easy, considering they were hitting me with the most potent regimen they could. Far from knocking me down for days after each treatment, I found myself largely unaffected by the typical chemotherapy side effects. Mostly, I had my usual energy and wasn't inhibited by nausea. The pain from the cancer seemed to subside pretty quickly as well, suggesting a good response, and other than one brief stretch in the hospital in August following some stomach virus infection, I didn't have any significant incidents throughout the course of treatment. After the first four treatments, we did a couple more scans to see how the cancer had responded. Surprisingly, the response seemed pretty good enough that my oncologist wanted to start touching base with a surgeon to shoot for some surgery after the treatment course was finished to attempt to remove all the remaining cancer. I was pretty impressed with the development.

With the positive response to chemotherapy and the fact that the rest of my body wasn't significantly affected by treatment, we went ahead. We pushed the eight treatment cycles up to twelve to see how much we could shrink the cancer ahead of surgery. And again, it wasn't until the last treatment or two that I started to feel some of the side effects from the chemotherapy. Going into January, things were looking pretty good, so I did a scan after my last treatment and was planning to schedule surgery sometime in early February to give my body a month to recover from chemotherapy.

Unfortunately, that's when things got a little disorganized. My last treatment was on January 7th, but I wasn't able to get the scan in until the 25th. The scan results looked good, according to my oncologist, showing the cancer had continued to respond, but then it was a week and a half until I heard from the surgeon. Because of some of the lymph nodes that were involved, she told me it wouldn't be possible to remove all the cancer, although she'd be willing to give surgery a shot anyway to see what could be possible, aiming for some time in February. After two weeks of

waiting to hear about confirming a surgery date, a friend found the number for the surgery scheduling office for me, so I called in to ask why it was taking so long to schedule me. It seems I had fallen through the cracks, and now the earliest surgery date available was March 8th, a whole month after I initially imagined us doing the surgery.

Already putting chemotherapy on hold for surgery for such an aggressive cancer was a gamble, and I knew it. I had been willing to take that gamble when I thought there was a possibility we could remove all the cancer, assuming we would schedule the surgery relatively quickly. Had I known that surgery wouldn't be scheduled for two months and even at its best the surgeon wasn't expecting to be able to remove everything, I probably wouldn't have taken that gamble, but either way this is the place God has brought us to now. No sense in second guessing decisions at this point.

We go into this surgery on Tuesday with many unknowns. Because this is an invasive cancer, it doesn't always show up well on scans, so we don't know if the recent scan results represent an accurate picture of what we'll find when we open me up. We know the worst spot is in one area of my small intestine; that's the part that brought me in to the hospital with an obstruction two weeks ago. Given how aggressive we know this cancer to be, the doctors took this obstruction as a sign that the cancer had just grown back too much in the short time I had been off chemo, and even though they were willing to keep the March 8th surgery date on the books, there didn't seem to be much confidence that surgery would help me at that point. Once these cancers get to the point of causing obstructions like this, there aren't a lot of great options. You can't resume chemotherapy while you have an intestinal obstruction, and the more intensive the surgery ends up being the longer you need to wait to try to resume chemotherapy, which just gives the remaining cancer that much more opportunity to grow back.

Then another twist came when the obstruction seemed to at least partly resolve itself on its own after a week in the hospital...as if either the obstruction wasn't entirely caused by the cancer or that the tumor had somehow shrunk all on its own, adding to the questions this week. I'm still in some discomfort, but the fact that I don't seem to be as bad now as I was two weeks ago is fascinating. There were several points during the first week in the hospital where I thought things were too bad to recover from, but each time, we got a big prayer group together in response, and the situation turned around the next day. It seems God wants to teach us something about prayer during this time.

This has been a problematic battle up until now, but it's worth fighting. Of course, as Christians, our mindset in the struggle of life and death is slightly different. I see many people fighting battles dominated by fear; it's a fear of death that motivates them. I remember reading about wealthy people spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to cryofreeze themselves in the hopes that they could be thawed out sometime in the distant future after we've discovered a cure for death or something...or at least a cure for whatever terminal illness they possibly have. The reality is that no

matter what you do to try to delay it, we're all going to face death at some point in our lives. These bodies aren't immortal.

The Christian fights for life for a different reason. A common question in light of Heaven is whether we even want to continue to be on this earth. If Heaven is much better, why stick around after finding salvation? We look forward to the day when we will be free of death, disease, and the curse of sin in this world. Yet we also know that life is a precious gift from God and shouldn't be discarded carelessly. The people and relationships in our lives are also precious gifts from God...even the ones that are difficult to love. And precious things are worth fighting for.

As Paul fought to be reunited with those whose lives he had impacted so he could continue to feed into them, we also fight to continue the work we've been tasked with. There's pain in the fight, joy in the victories and joy in knowing the job isn't in vain. So, let's see what comes of the surgery this week and where God takes us next.

GOD OF THE HILLS AND VALLEYS DEVOTIONAL, AUGUST 2022

Well, it has been an exciting few weeks. It's been really encouraging to see all the messages and congratulations from everyone about Lara and me getting engaged, and we're looking forward to seeing what God will do in the months ahead. Meanwhile, we've wrapped up our series going through the Psalms; the last two weeks, we will look at Psalm 139 and think about God's presence and involvement in even the trivial details of our lives. God didn't create us by accident; we won't foil His plans, no matter our mistakes.

Thinking about this Psalm reminded me of a story in the Old Testament when the nation of Aram tried to attack the nation of Israel. The king of Aram gets his entire army together, surrounds Samaria, and insists that Israel surrender and give the Arameans whatever they want. At the time, Ahab is the king of Israel, and while he's willing to surrender at first, he realizes that the Arameans will just keep on taking and not stop, and they'd probably just kill him even if he surrenders.

Interestingly, even though Ahab is an evil king and is constantly turning his back on God and trying to kill God's prophets, God decides to step in here. Ahab may be cruel, but God still cares about his people and wants to save them. So, a prophet tells Ahab that he should go into battle, and even though he was outnumbered, he would win. So, Ahab sends his forces into battle, completely outnumbered, and something interesting happens. You see, the Arameans were so confident that they couldn't lose this battle that they were just sitting around in their tents getting drunk. As the Israelites started advancing to attack, the Arameans didn't have any defense ready at all, their leaders didn't give any actual orders, and they ended up getting wiped out. A good rule of life: never put a drunk guy in charge of your army.

Now, the king of Aram retreats, and he consults with his advisers to see why they lost this battle. In their minds, it had nothing to do with all their leaders being drunk during the war but had everything to do with God. Look at what happens in 1 Kings 20:23-25:

“Meanwhile, the officials of the king of Aram advised him, ‘Their Gods are Gods of the hills. That is why they were too strong for us. But if we fight them on the plains, surely we will be stronger than they. Do this: Remove all the kings from their commands and replace them with other officers. It would be best to raise an army like you lost—horse for horse and chariot for chariot—so we can fight Israel on the plains. Then surely we will be stronger than they.’ He agreed with them and acted accordingly.”

Back during this time, many people thought that the different Gods were limited to certain areas or certain powers. One God could control the weather, another the crops, another might be the God of an ocean, and another a God of a mountain. The Arameans decided that Israel's God must be a God of the hills because that's where this battle was. They can fight the Israelites

without their pesky God getting in the way if they change locations. And also...make sure we're not drunk this time...side note.

So the Arameans go in again with a vast army, taking up a position in a valley. Ok, they're set now, right? We're at a valley so that God won't have any power, and we're not drunk this time, and we have them outnumbered; there's no way we're losing.

There's a very famous quote right here in verse 28: "The man of God came up and told the king of Israel, 'This is what the Lord says: 'Because the Arameans think the Lord is a God of the hills and not a God of the valleys, I will deliver this vast army into your hands, and you will know that I am the Lord.'"

God is a God of the hills and valleys: the highs and the lows. Sure enough, God wins the battle, and the Aramean army is so devastated that they run back to one of their cities to escape. They get to that city, and a section of the wall ends up collapsing on the army and killing even more soldiers. Even in their town, they aren't safe from God. The king of Aram is so terrified that he finds the most hidden, secure room in the city he can and goes there to hide.

I think there's an exciting lesson in this story. Very often, you'll find people try to compartmentalize God. God belongs in this part of my life, but not that part. He can be my God on Sundays, but other days of the week...I have other stuff going on. You'll also see people put limits on what God can do; ok, maybe God can help me with this problem, but this other problem, that's too tough, no way God can do that. Whenever we limit God in these ways, we miss out on some of the things God has to offer us. We miss out on the peace and joy we have from knowing God controls our situations. We miss out on some protection God's laws offer us to keep us from things that hurt us. God knows us; he built us from the inside out, and we're best off when we include God in every aspect of our lives. So this week, let's pray that last line of Psalm 139 -

Search me, God, and know my heart;

Test me and know my anxious thoughts.

See if there is any offensive way in me,

And lead me in the way everlasting.

THE STORY OF RUTH

This week, we were looking at God's instructions for interacting with our families. It can be a real challenge because while, on the one hand, our families are typically the ones who love us the most, they can also be the ones who annoy us the most. Right? Conflicts pop up, we disagree on things, and sometimes we get frustrated with each other. So, we might look for an excellent example of what a family should be and try to model things after that. The exciting thing, though, is if you look through the Bible at different families, you rarely see stories about good, healthy families. Nearly every family that the Bible goes into detail describing, from the beginning of Genesis to the Babylonian Exile, has a lot of problems and significant issues. We saw that last week with Jehoram and Athaliah, didn't we?

As I was thinking about this, though, one story in the Bible came to mind. It is a small, little-known book about a seemingly insignificant woman named Ruth. This was long ago, a few generations before King David came along. A Jewish couple, Elimelech and Naomi, and their two sons decide to leave their hometown of Bethlehem during a famine and move to the nearby land of Moab.

While they live in Moab, the two sons get married, and things seem to be going well initially. But then tragedy hits: Elimelech dies, leaving his wife a widow. Then things get even worse; both these sons die, and now Naomi and her two daughters-in-law are left alone as widows. Naomi is just a wreck and decides it's time to go back home to Bethlehem and see if she can find food there and not starve. She turns to her daughters-in-law and tells them to leave her, return to their land of Moab, return to their friends and families, and try to start life over again. At first, they both say no; they want to go with her, but eventually, one agrees to return home.

However, the other one insists on staying with her mother-in-law. Her name was Ruth. Listen to what she says in Ruth 1:16-18:

But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

Ruth has an amazing attitude here. After everything the family has been through, she could have easily gotten bitter and discouraged, maybe blaming her mother-in-law for how things turned out or even blaming God. Instead, she doubles down on her commitment to her new family, who, at this point, is just Naomi. No matter what happens, she promised to be a part of this family when she got married, and she won't abandon her mother-in-law when she's in need.

Family is important; it's where we first learn that we have an obligation to someone other than ourselves. We must remember this because we live in a society that increasingly tells us that we should always put ourselves first and that our only absolute obligation is to make ourselves happy. But as I've said in the past, one of the things you'll find in life is that it's your responsibilities, your obligations, and the people who depend on you that give you joy and purpose day by day. Yes, it's tiring and challenging; we want to give up sometimes. A child throws a tantrum, and a parent gets frustrated. A parent sets a rule you don't like, maybe insists you do some chores around the house, and you get angry because you want to go outside and play with your friends. But take your family obligations seriously, submit to one another, and you'll find incredible joy hidden in the work.

The story of Ruth is a fascinating one for several reasons. For one, we never see God show up anywhere, not directly anyway. God doesn't say anything; there aren't any spectacular miracles, and no prophets come by to bring an important message. Just people doing their best to do the right thing in difficult circumstances. But it's a tragedy that turns into a love story. As Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem, Ruth goes out to see if she can find food for them during harvest time.

Back in those times, rather than having food banks, homeless shelters, or government programs, God had given instructions to farmers to leave just a little of their crops behind whenever there was a harvest so that people who were poor and homeless could come over and pick a little food for themselves. So Ruth finds a field and takes a little for herself and Naomi. The field belongs to a man named Boaz, and he sees Ruth doing this and learns about her story. He's so touched by Ruth's commitment to Naomi that he goes above and beyond to give them as much food as they need. And then, the love story starts; Ruth is moved by the generosity of Boaz and Boaz is moved by the fantastic attitude Ruth has during such a difficult time. And then it turns out Boaz is the perfect person to help Naomi and Ruth out of their situation and reclaim their old land in Bethlehem before Elimelech and Naomi left. In the end, Boaz and Ruth get married, and they get their happily-ever-after ending.

Now you might be thinking, wait a second, Bethlehem, isn't that...? Yep, that's the town David was born in, the town Jesus was born in. In fact, Boaz and Ruth are their ancestors; Boaz and Ruth are the great grandparents of King David. All because Ruth stayed committed to her family through the tragedy, and was willing to go all the way to a new land to support her struggling mother-in-law.

What does it mean to submit to one another in our families? What does it mean to honor our father and mother? It means we're willing to sacrifice for their benefit. We're eager to give up some of what we like and enjoy for their sake. We'll all have moments of arguing and disagreements, but there is a tremendous reward for those who stick through it. So whatever situation you find your family in, look for ways to serve each other, and in the words of Boaz, "May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."

IN GOD'S HANDS SERMON
Calvary Armenian Congregational Church

Luke 12:4-7:

“I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

This will seem like a strange for me to start a sermon, but bear with me for a few minutes and hopefully you will see why I'm starting this way. Trust me, it will make sense by the end. I remember reading about a very high profile criminal case not too long ago; I'm sure many of you saw it in the news. A wealthy man had spent many years destroying the lives of children and young girls and hiding behind his money and political connections to avoid the law. Someone so evil that let's not even talk about what he did. Of course, eventually, everything came to light: his victims came forward, he was arrested, and he was finally going to face justice. Of course, he was a coward, as those who destroy the lives of children always are, and rather than be willing to face justice, he chose instead to take his own life while in prison, a story not that uncommon.

After that happened, I read some statements from some of his victims, and I noticed some saying that they felt they had been denied justice, that somehow this man had escaped the punishment he deserved by taking his own life. As I read that, I remember thinking: You don't realize that was no escape. In his efforts to try to escape human accusers and a human judge, after taking his life, he would be met with the supreme judge. A judge who does not take a bribe, who cannot be deceived, who hears the cry of every victim, and will not be satisfied until true justice is done.

I try to wrap my mind around how terrifying that must be. In my mind, I saw this comical image of a boy showing up to the house of the girl he likes to take her on a date, like something out of a TV show or a movie. He's met by his date's overly protective father at the door, who brings him into the house. The father explains that his daughter must be home by a specific time, and various rules must be followed during the date, and he does something a little threatening in a funny way. You know those kinds of scenes. I doubt many people watched this movie, but there's this funny scene in one of the new Karate Kid movies. The gentle Mr. Miyagi is now mentoring a new student, Julie, and her date comes to pick her up. Of course, he's sharpening a knife and cutting vegetables as he comes in, and as the boy explains that the dance goes until midnight, Mr. Miyagi says, “So, you bring her home by...ten o'clock?”

Mr. Miyagi is this kind, gentle man, but he's also a dangerous martial arts master, so you don't want to get on his wrong side. And, of course, the boy is frightened and says, “Oh, absolutely, sir.” That boy knows his date must be brought back home at the right time, or he will face the wrath of

that father. And the wrath of a father who loves his daughter is a terrifying thing to face. How much more frightening is the wrath of the supreme father, creator of heaven and earth, toward those who would dare to harm his children?

That might seem to be a strange thought to start this sermon with because, in this passage, Jesus commands us not to be afraid. He's encouraging us, repeatedly saying in this section of Luke, "Don't be afraid, don't worry." But he starts here reminding us of God's wrath. He says be afraid of God, who has the power not just to kill but after to throw us into gehenna. Most of our Bibles translate that word as hell, but literally, it was a valley by Jerusalem. I don't think we're sure exactly where it was, but in the times of the Old Testament it seems to have been the area where Israelites, even kings, practiced child sacrifice. Eventually, the area was cursed by God, destroyed, and presumably used as a trash dump, where trash and dead things were thrown and burned. By the time of Jesus, it was being used figuratively to refer to a place of God's wrath and judgment, and Jesus refers to it many times in his warnings to people.

Many of Jesus' parables at some point involve judgment and fire. Think of the parable of the sheep and the goats. As the goats are separated to the left, God says, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." And notice here, this image we have here, this eternal fire that represents God's judgment; it wasn't made for us. It was created for Satan; that's his destiny, that's his punishment. Think also of the image in Revelation 20:14: "Then death and hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death." The end of death, our new resurrected life in the new creation, is described as if death itself is being thrown into this fire, forever destroyed so that death and sorrow can never hurt us again. But the warning there is, even though this place of destruction wasn't originally created for us, we could still end up there.

This topic makes us uncomfortable. We don't like to think of it. And I believe there are many reasons why that is. Perhaps we're thinking of God's love, and we read in God's word in 2 Peter 3:9 - "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." Or perhaps we read in Ezekiel 33:11 - "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways!" Or perhaps we just look at John 3:16 - "For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." And we see these promises, this desire God has to save each one of us from our sin, and maybe we think, "How can God send us to punishment when his heart is to save each one of us?"

Perhaps this topic makes us uncomfortable because we realize that if we got what we really deserved, we'd fall under this judgment and wrath that Jesus discusses. We just finished going through the Sermon on the Mount with the high school and junior high group, and one of the things we noticed was just how high the bar is that Jesus has set for righteousness. How we think

about other people can get us into trouble. Our anger, pride, selfishness, all these things separate us from the perfect holy God, and now we're in trouble. We've fallen short of God's rigorous standard, just as throughout history, Israel failed to obey God's entire law, and now we don't want to really think about what comes next.

But we need to think about this, we need to reflect on this, and there are two main reasons why doing that will help us conquer our fear. Remember, Jesus is bringing this up in the context of telling us not to be afraid. He's assuring us here, if we're willing to look at it. We were talking about this last week in our Sunday school class: not being afraid. And I asked the group, what causes you to be scared of something? I loved the group's answer: we're afraid of something when we know it has the power to hurt us. That's really what it boils down to, right? Every fear we have is ultimately tied to the power that thing, that person, that situation has to hurt us. The more powerful and dangerous the thing is, the greater the fear. And how many hazardous and mighty things are we always surrounded with? Let's be honest; the world is full of stuff with tremendous power to hurt us—things that we can see and can't.

And surrounded by all these fears, Jesus points us to look up. Jesus says, yes, there are powerful and dangerous things here. But you want to know who's the most dangerous? Do you want to know who has the most power? And in pointing up, he's pointing to himself and saying if you're going to be afraid of anything, be scared of me because I have the power. Now, watch me use that power. And Jesus goes, and he demonstrates that power by healing the sick. And he goes, and he feeds the hungry. And he goes and tells the sinner that they're forgiven. He goes and uses his power to die for our sins and come back to life to show that death no longer has any victory. That fire that we were afraid of? That fire is where death will be thrown, and no longer do we live in fear of it.

The first verse in the Bible to be translated into Armenian: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Why is this so important? Because once we understand that the only one worth fearing is also the one who loves us more than we could ever imagine, nothing will ever make us afraid. Let me say that again, and listen to this: When we understand the one with all the power, the only one to be scared of, is the one who loves us, forgives us, and calls us his children, nothing on earth will cause us to fear. That terrifying dad, that overprotective father who loves his daughter dearly: that's our father, and we're the ones he's protective of. There was a beautiful image one pastor shared with me once of how God helped him deal with his fears. He was at a swimming pool with his daughter, and his little girl got up to run off the diving board to jump into the water. No fear at all. As he's in the water watching her jump toward him, he feels God speaking in his spirit: "This little child isn't afraid because she knows she has her father right there to keep her safe." We have that heavenly father watching over us. Will we go through dark and dangerous times? Sure. Will we get hurt? Yeah, we will. Does God promise us a day when death will be defeated, and every tear will be wiped from our eyes? Yeah, he does.

“Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Don’t be afraid; you are worth more than sparrows.” Some of God’s promises are, maybe, more encouraging to some than others. That whole “The very hairs of your head are numbered” thing? Yeah, well...ok, yes, I think I have that number. It’s not a big one, trust me. (I’m bald). But what’s Jesus saying here? He knows our situation, is powerful, and is on our side. I love that line from the song: His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me. His eye is on those five sparrows, worth only a few pennies; how much more is his eye on us? If we’re willing to trust him as we walk through this valley of the shadow of death, we have an eternal reward waiting for us that no one can take away.

I said there were two main reasons why reflecting on gehenna and hell is essential to conquer fear. The first one is that when we know that the only thing worth fearing, God’s judgment, has been taken by Jesus so that we won’t face it, nothing can make us afraid. We’re more than conquerors through him who loves us. But the second reason is that we need to remember that God will still judge the wicked who rebel against him. God is a good judge. A judge who does not take a bribe, who cannot be deceived, who hears the cry of every victim, and will not be satisfied until true justice is done. We need to remind ourselves of this because we often won’t see perfect justice enacted here on Earth. We just won’t. The corrupt may escape human justice with a bribe. The crafty may deceive human justice with a clever lie. Victims may not have their cries heard by our judges and leaders. Many crimes will go unsolved and unpunished. And for some crimes, no punishment seems sufficient.

Sometimes, God works His justice here on earth for us to see, to remind us that true justice is still there waiting, but not every time. When I’m in Haiti, it’s always sad to see the corruption there. One of our guys was accused of a crime and convicted without a trial simply because he didn’t pay the judge a bribe. The judge didn’t care about guilt or innocence; it was all about who could give the bribe. Or one time when our friends there were trying to get a truck through customs that had been donated. The price for bringing the car through was maybe \$3000, but when the officials found out that they had friends in America, it was \$12,000 to get it through. And there’s nothing we can do; they’re the law. I think of the amazing pastors I met in Vietnam who spent days and even years in prison, just kept there until the authorities ran out of money to take, and then they were released.

Or perhaps, as Armenians, we think of the genocide and crimes committed a century ago, perpetrated by evil men who have long since died and will never be brought to justice by a human court. Instead, they will answer to God himself, the supreme father of all those they killed. I think they would have been better off facing a human judge. And I need to say this here, too: a good understanding of gehenna isn’t just for conquering our fears; we also need it to be able to let go of the pain of our past. The pain left over from those who hurt us. To give up on revenge and leave our case in God’s hands. We will never believe God is good and can be trusted with our futures if

we don't acknowledge that in the end, he's a good judge: a judge who does not take a bribe, who cannot be deceived, who hears the cry of every victim and will not be satisfied until true justice is done.

And for those who have put their trust in His salvation, that forgiveness is right there. For those who persist in living for evil, we leave them in God's hands. Do we want them to repent and turn to God for forgiveness? Sure we do. Are we going to share the gospel with those who have hurt us? Sure we are. Can we trust that God is going to make the proper judgment? Sure, we can; he's had much experience. He knows what he's doing. In our lives, we'll have enemies that repent and turn to the gospel, and maybe we'll have some that don't, but either way, we can trust that God is the one with the power, and he uses that power for the sake of his children.

I'm not saying we don't try to work proper justice here on earth; of course, we work to make sure the guilty are punished and the innocent are protected. But when it seems like evil is escaping justice or our fears are too strong to fight, we remind ourselves that the true judge is still on His throne, and none of these things escape His sight.

You could say that in life, there are two or maybe three directions we can look in. One is to look just around us. If we look at our problems, worries, and struggles, we will always feel overwhelmed by them. We could look down, which means that we're looking at our sin, looking at judgment, looking with fear at Gehenna. But Jesus tells us to look up to the holy one on his throne. He's the one we put our trust in. And take this to heart as I say this: we can only look in one direction at a time. Some animals have eyes on their heads that can look all around simultaneously. Our eyes are in the front; we can only focus on one direction at a time, but we have depth perception and can tell how far away we are from that thing. I think there's a metaphor in there somewhere, so take it to heart.

One last thought. I want to look one last time at the fear of the Lord and wisdom. Notice that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The beginning, not the end. It's where we need to start in our walk with God because it shows us that we need a savior. Jesus starts us there, but he doesn't leave us there. As it says in 1 John 4:18: "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love." If you find yourself overwhelmed by your fears and worries and can't feel thankful in life, maybe it's time to look up. Put all your fear in God first; be afraid of him, as strange as that sounds. Confess your sins, fears, and struggles before God, and let his mercy and forgiveness overwhelm you. Watch his perfect love start removing the fears and anxieties bit by bit in your life. Let his forgiveness fill you with thankfulness, as bit by bit, he transforms your life.

Because when we understand what we've been saved from and what we've been brought into, that's a radical thing. Ultimately, we don't fear because we know we're in God's hands. He's

robust, more powerful than everything we'll ever face. He sees even the minor details in our lives and, for our sakes, works out our salvation. So seek him first, and let Him take care of the rest.

AND NOW IT STARTS SERMON

November 11, 2018, Calvary Armenian Congregational Church

Genesis 4:1-16: (Cain and Abel story):

Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, “With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man.”² Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.³ In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord.⁴ And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering,⁵ but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

⁶ Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷ If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.”

⁸ Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

⁹ Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

¹⁰ The Lord said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. ¹¹ Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. ¹² When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.”

¹³ Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is more than I can bear. ¹⁴ Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.”

¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, “Not so; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over.” Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. ¹⁶ So Cain went out from the Lord’s presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

There’s been a lot on my heart these past few months. I’ve been working on this sermon today since April, thinking about it and meditating on it. When they asked me a few weeks ago to sub in for this Sunday, I figured it was the right time to do this one. And then, two weeks ago, after I had already decided to preach on the story of Cain and Abel, there was that shooting at the synagogue in Pittsburgh [October 27, 2018]. And then a couple of days ago [November 7, 2018], there was

that shooting down in Thousand Oaks. So many people were killed, and here I am, set to preach about the first murder in recorded human history. This is the first event recorded in the Bible after Adam and Eve were sent out from the Garden of Eden. Have you ever thought about that? We have this quick overview of creation and the fall, and then we leave the garden, and this is the first thing we're told about. We don't start with "And then Adam and Eve went and built a house" or how they started farming. There is no mythological story about how humans tricked God and stole fire, how the spider got its web, or something silly. No, humankind's story starts with one brother getting jealous of the other and murdering him.

You sit there, read this story, and think to yourself, "Why God? Why is that the first story you want to tell us?" I think there's a reason for this. It's interesting that for all the talk about Genesis being interpreted as literal or figurative, all the talk of evolution versus creation, and all the debating, there are very few details in the early chapters of Genesis. We have no idea how long Adam and Eve were in the garden before they sinned. We have no idea what food Cain was growing. We have no idea where Abel got the flocks he cared for or even what animals they were. We know that Cain was born first, then Abel, and then later Seth, but we have no idea where their wives came from. Did they marry sisters? They had other brothers and sisters, but none were ever named. Did God create people other than just Adam and Eve to start with?

We don't get any of those details. It's almost like God doesn't care about any of that. The goal of the Bible isn't to give us a detailed description of how the earth came into being. The first accurate details we get are from this story here. On that note, the fact that Cain killing his younger brother is the first event described in the Bible is a significant message. God is warning us that this would be the norm now that Adam and Eve have left the garden. Anger and violence, even among close brothers. This is what a fallen world would be like. This would now be the world we lived in. A world with murder. A world with war. A world with genocide and tragedy. This is a world at war with God.

And in the midst of this, it almost feels like God failed. I mean, look at it, honestly. Abel was the righteous one. Did you see that? The first story after Eden we get is not one with a moral of "Do the right thing and good things will happen to you; do the wrong thing, and you get punished." Adam and Eve were told that if they ate that fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, they would die, and yet here we are, the very first person in the recorded history of the Bible to die was the guy God liked. The first person to die was the one God looked at and said, "You see that right there? That's what we need more of; we need more guys like Abel." In our distress, we look at that and say, "God, what were you doing?" "God, you tell us you'll be our shield and defender, an ever-present help in time of need. Why weren't you shielding Abel? Why weren't you defending him? Where were you in his time of need?" Maybe we ask that for ourselves: where were you in my time of need? Where were you in...their time of need?

That feeling, like God stood by and did nothing. It makes me think of the story of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Jesus gets to town a few days after Lazarus has died, and Martha and Mary come up to him, crying, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died. Jesus, we know you can do anything, but man, if only you had been here. If you had been there, my situation would have turned out differently. If only you had been there. Jesus, why weren’t you there?”

It may feel like God has forgotten and left us in those darkest moments. I think a lot of you know some of my history, having cancer when I was fifteen, twenty years ago, can you believe it? I was diagnosed precisely twenty years ago on Thanksgiving day, no less. I remember nights of just unbearable pain, days where it was too much to even get out of bed, and in those moments, in those moments of pain and loss, it’s easy to feel like God has left us. But even as we come to Jesus in despair, with our broken prayers almost accusing him of abandoning us, he walks with us and asks, “Where have you laid him?” Please take me to the spot where you abandoned your hope. And he walks there with us, weeping. The shortest verse in the whole Bible, John 11:35: “Jesus wept.” But even as Mary and Martha come to Jesus in tears, Jesus tells them, “Your brother will rise again.”

And we say, of course, we know that. Martha says “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” I know my theology, you don’t need to remind me. We die, we go to heaven, it’s ... Jesus says no, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.” Jesus is telling Martha that she doesn’t have to wait until that final day; she has the source of life right in front of her, in this moment, in her presence. Some of you, listen to me: it may feel overwhelming as we’re going through the most challenging moments like when Abel’s body is still warm on the ground and when Lazarus is lying cold in the tomb, but this message that Jesus speaks to Martha is also for us.

We put our trust in this resurrection and life. And sure enough, Jesus brings Mary and Martha to the tomb and brings Lazarus back to life.

We may not always get the miracle we want, but we have an eternal, secure hope. God is starting his narrative of human existence on this earth by being completely honest with us and saying, “Yes, this is going to be bad. This is not going to be the paradise that Eden was.” And as Christians, as we work to advance the kingdom, to bring more people into a saving knowledge of God, into the right relationship with God, into that eternal hope, Jesus warns us, “You’re going to be like sheep among wolves.” You’re going to be Abel, but there will be Cains.

Before I talk too much about us and the hope and restoration, I want to discuss these two brothers and what we can learn about the heart of God here. Because part of us feels like God should have done something to warn Abel, right? God knows the situation; how hard would it have been for a little, “Hey, watch out, Abel, your brother is going a little off today, probably want to stay in the

house today.” But look, God doesn’t warn Abel; he warns Cain. He sees Cain getting ready to go down the wrong path and calls out to him. And really, we don’t know what this looked like. I know it’s a little hard for us to wrap our heads around a scene where God seems so much closer and more personal than it feels now. Like God is almost talking to people face to face like we would.

We don’t know what drove Cain to want to offer some of his crops to God or why Abel thought he should bring the best of the firstborn of his flock. We don’t know how God approved these offerings or what worship looked like back then. But whatever the reason, Cain brought some of his crops, and Abel brought the best he had to offer. Abel came wholeheartedly, giving God the best he had before anything else. We don’t know what Cain brought, but it seems to be an offering of convenience rather than sacrifice. So, Cain missed out on some of the favors Abel received.

Note God’s response to Cain’s anger. Cain is upset, but God isn’t. God’s message to Cain is one of reassurance more than anything else. Perhaps a bit of a warning as well. There’s no reason to be upset or angry. There would be more chances to do what is right. This isn’t the end of the world. In the future, focus on doing what is right and be careful not to be captured by sin.

This reassurance does nothing for Cain, however. Cain is jealous. He wanted what Abel had but wasn’t willing to do the work. If I can’t have God’s favor, no one can! And just like that, in a single moment, in a moment of emotion, one wrong decision cost Cain everything and left Adam and Eve without a child. For the first time, we see what a powerful emotion anger is, able to break even the most intimate of family bonds.

Cain, of course, is cursed by God. He would have to leave the area; crops would no longer grow for him there. From now on, he would be a restless wanderer. Cain complains, of course, that his punishment was too harsh. If he left, then he might be killed by anyone he ran into (implying that there are other humans in the world by this point besides just Adam and Eve’s family). Interestingly, God grants Cain some protection so that he won’t be killed. With that, Cain “went out from the Lord’s presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.”

All we know after that is that Cain had a kid and built some settlement or city. We don’t know if he felt remorse; we don’t know if he ever sought God after that. Honestly, it doesn’t matter. The story’s point is clear, if not a little Star Wars themed: jealousy leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to...the dark side. All for nothing. There was nothing to be gained and everything to be lost. Yet that same foolish hatred lives on today and continues to drive people to destroy the lives of others, as well as their own.

I think there’s a reason God leaves Cain’s story unfinished in the Bible. Because at some point in our life, we will relate to Cain. Because in this fallen and broken world, we are also fallen and broken people, even when we’re putting on a good show, even when it looks like we’re holding it

all together. God is warning Cain, and He's warning us, not out of anger or hatred, but out of love. Watch out; sin is crouching at the door; it's coming for you. We're introduced to this idea, right in the beginning of the Bible, that there's this force, there's something, that's going to try to take us off the right path and separate us from God. And then later, over the course of the Bible, we're introduced more to this idea that there's an accuser (Satan, right, that's what the word means, "accuser"); someone who's going after us, trying to show that we're not worthy, that we're not deserving of God's love and trying to deceive us. Even later in the Bible, we learn that the serpent in the Garden of Eden wasn't just a snake slithering around; it was Satan, the devil, working from the beginning against us, angry because of his own mistakes.

Right off the bat, God wants to warn us in the first story in the Bible that this deceiver, this sin, is trying to control us. And if it can't control us, it'll try to take us out of the picture. And also, listen to me on this one; I know some people aren't going to like to hear it but I need to say it anyway. There are times when the devil is going to succeed. He will deceive us, misdirect us, and we'll mess up. Maybe we won't mess up to the point of murdering our own family (hopefully we won't), but Jesus warns us, "Hey if you're angry? You've heard it said, anyone who murders will be subject to judgment, but I tell you, anyone who's angry, who slips into that jealous Cain mindset, watch out because you're in danger now."

And then maybe we respond, "God, how can I do anything then? If I'm going to mess up, I can't even go outside; sin is waiting at the door for me. What am I supposed to do?"

In Romans 7, the apostle Paul writes, "So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

He then gives us one answer: Jesus. Romans 8:1-2: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death."

Listen to me on this one, and maybe some people will disagree with me on this, that's ok, but I think the reason God leaves Cain's story unfinished is he wants us to know that our story is unfinished. The mistakes of your past don't define your future; God is calling out to every one of us saying "Yes, I see it all, and I'm still sending my Son to die for you so you can be with me." God's goal isn't to make us prosper here on earth. God wants to fix that thing that broke in the Garden of Eden. He leaves Cain on earth; He takes Abel home. God's looking at us, not saying, "Man, how can I get Matt a bigger house? How can I get Aren a nicer car?" He's looking at you, saying, "I'm bringing my child home where she belongs. I'm bringing my children back to the

garden, where they were meant to be.” We may be a little distressed because it seems like God sometimes leaves evil unpunished at first. That God is slow in bringing justice. But he isn’t.

Look, I know some people think that the Bible is like some big rule book of all the things you’re supposed to do in life to be a good person. And sure, there are some rules there, but that’s not the point. The Bible first shows us that the world is broken; it’s at war with God, and in every war, every act of hatred, every moment of selfishness, every moment, we feel desperate and abandoned...but we aren’t abandoned. God had a plan from the beginning, a plan to restore us to that right relationship. We may feel distant from God, maybe for different reasons. Sometimes, we hide in shame; maybe other times, God is letting us face the consequences of our mistakes and our rejection of Him, but God’s never as distant as we think. He was there walking in the garden with Adam and Eve and wants to be walking with you, too.

He wants to change you, too. In his famous Sermon on the Mount, as he preaches through the Law of Moses and what the application looks like in our lives, he addresses the issue of murder in a very challenging way:

Matthew 5:21-22: “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca’ (most likely an insult saying someone is “empty-headed”) is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ (an insult indicating both a lack of morality as well as intelligence) will be in danger of the fire of hell.”

The message in this is clear: from God’s perspective, there is little difference between the act of murder and the motivations that lead to it. Someone who lives a life guided by hatred has the heart of a murderer, and in one way or another, that heart will be reflected in their life. We see that hatred at work in the world every day.

So, how do we continue to hope in the power of God in a world where Cain kills Abel? First, we remember the story of Lazarus. Jesus waited four days to get there to bring Lazarus back to life. Back then, they didn’t believe you could bring someone back to life if it had been more than three days. They said after three days, the soul was gone. Jesus was already doing a miracle, but he was doing one that was miraculous, even for a miracle. This is the power of God to raise the dead. And if you’ve trusted in Him, that same power is in you.

It’s a power to defeat armies. There’s a scene in the Old Testament when a whole army goes after one prophet, Elisha. You might remember that I preached about that guy the last two times I preached, so I think we have to keep the Elisha streak going. The whole army surrounds his position, and Elisha’s guy is scared, saying, what are we going to do? We’re in trouble. Elisha just says, “God, show this guy what’s really going on.” And boom, the guy sees that the enemy army is actually the one surrounded by God’s army. Some of you, listen, maybe your prayer shouldn’t be

“God, get me out of this situation.” Maybe try praying, God show me the army. Elisha goes and captures the entire enemy army and marches them straight to the King of Israel, saying, “Hey, these guys came to kill me, so I captured them and brought them here. We don’t need to kill them; just give them something to eat and let them go home.” This army comes to kill him. He catches them and lets them go, and they decide not to try that again. See, people can learn.

OK, I have a cool one for you. Any of you know this guy? They called him Leo the Great, and for many scholars, he’s the first person they identify as having the title of Pope. He was a major bishop in Rome, when the Roman Empire was just falling apart. Attila the Hun moves in; he’s conquering land and ready to go after the city of Rome. The Roman government has nothing; they’re running away, there are no defenses, and it looks like a lot of people are going to die. Leo goes out there, one man versus an army, right? He was the only one left in the city with the authority to do something about this situation, to stop the city from being destroyed, so he stepped up. Historians are not entirely sure what happened, don’t know who said what, or how anything was done. All we know is one thing: Attila and his army left. They left. They didn’t attack the city or steal anything; just one man of God versus an army, and the army left. If that’s not enough, three years later, almost the same thing happens: a different guy comes in with a different army, Leo goes out...and that’s that. Army goes away, Leo wins. Because it’s not one man versus an army; it’s God versus an army. And a fun fact, you know, we were doing the food festival yesterday. November tenth is like Pope Leo Day in the Catholic Church. It was funny. I was thinking about how to include stories of guys taking down armies in the sermon for this week, and I thought of Leo and wanted to include his story. As I was reviewing the history, I found out this was Leo day.

Anyway, to wrap this all up. I know things look bad now. It’s easy to feel...just...lost when we hear about murders, wars, and fires all around the state. They just had that shooting in Thousand Oaks, and now they’re having to evacuate because of the fires; we have fires up here, people were walking around with masks this week at San Francisco State, we see tragedy around the world, a whole caravan of people, thousands of people, currently traveling from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, fleeing from violence and gangs and just dangerous situations. I think of the crisis in Yemen right now, parts of Africa that are still in danger of Boko Haram going around kidnapping and killing people and kids and selling girls into slavery and laughing about it.

And we could keep going. The same things have happened throughout history, ever since Cain and Abel. And yeah, we won’t change it. It’s a broken world, and we can’t fix it. So, what do we do? We advance. We conquer armies not by our power but by God’s power. And it’s not people we’re fighting; rather it’s people we’re saving.

In Ephesians 6:12, Paul writes, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

Even this week, as I was reading about the shootings in the last few weeks, looking at the stories of the victims, reading the stories of the people fleeing the violence in Central America, hoping somewhere on this planet where they can find peace and safety, I ask myself, “am I advancing the kingdom of God here on earth? Am I sharing the hope of salvation and eternal life with people? Am I fixing my eyes on heavenly things?” Because it starts with us first. Don’t worry about changing the world first. First, we align our hearts to God, seek his spirit, and walk in step with Him. And then ask God to send you. The harvest is plentiful; you have no idea. There are people out there desperate for the hope Jesus gives. Are you going to be the one to bring that message?

SEEING THE UNSEEN DEVOTIONAL

There's a very interesting scene in 2 Kings chapter 6. The Syrian army sets out to capture the prophet Elisha, hoping to prevent him from helping the armies of Israel. They surround the city he's staying in, and as they're getting ready to move in, Elisha's servant sees them and runs to warn Elisha. The situation looks pretty desperate; how will they escape this massive army? Elisha stops him and says, "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." He then prays that God would open his servant's eyes to see the true situation, and when he looks out, he realizes all the surrounding hills are filled with flaming chariots and forces of heaven. God's invisible army had the Syrian army surrounded. The battle did not go well for the Syrians.

This is a good story to reflect on as we continue through Genesis 42 and 43. This week, we find Jacob very discouraged; Simeon is in prison in Egypt, and he's forced to send Benjamin with the rest of the brothers to secure his release. Thinking about how he has already lost Joseph, he's not sure if he can handle losing another son. From his perspective, things look pretty hopeless. The thing is, he's focused entirely on the situation from a worldly perspective. He's focused on the danger around him, not God's protection over him. Like Elisha's servant, he didn't see the forces on his side. If he had seen things from God's perspective, he would have realized he was sending Benjamin to a place where he would be completely safe, to be reunited with his brother Joseph. The reality was that there was absolutely no danger at all; Joseph would ensure that all his brothers would be safe.

As Christians, we need to fix our eyes on the things that are unseen rather than the things that are seen. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 says: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

When our eyes are focused on the seen things, we focus on our problems and limitations. We'll miss out on many of the solutions and opportunities God might give us. Fixing our eyes on what's unseen means thinking about God's promises about the future. It means praying, asking God to guide us in His will. It means finding our joy in the work God is continually doing in our hearts, transforming our character rather than finding joy in worldly wealth and status. Wealth, power, conflicts, sickness are all temporary things that we can see, but they won't last. The important eternal things we can't see (it's not like I can hold salvation in my hands); the reality is those are the eternal things that matter most.

If Jacob had been praying and seeking God's will, he might have realized that God was working on some important plans through all of this. In the end, all of this worked out for his salvation and

the salvation of his family. And you know what? For those who have put our trust in Jesus, God also works things out for our salvation. So, let's fix our eyes on the promises and not get distracted by the problems of this world.

MATT SILVERMAN TESTIMONY

To The Armenian Evangelical Union of North America
Biennial Convention, June 2022 amidst cancer

Hi everyone! Sadly, I couldn't make it to the convention this year, but I was asked to put a video together for you guys instead. For those who don't know me, my name is Matt Silverman. I grew up roughly connected to Calvary Armenian Congregational Church (CACC) in San Francisco. However, I only started regularly attending church at United Armenian Congregational Church (UACC) in Hollywood when I went to Los Angeles for college. As I started getting plugged into the college group and Bible studies there, I recognized that there was something different about these people; something just felt different at church. About a year later, I found myself at the Christian Camp Arev college retreat, where I gave my life to Christ.

There was one verse that really transformed me that weekend. It was Romans 8:38-39: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That love that was described—a love we could never lose—is something that always looks out for our good. And I guess that's the theme for the Biennial Convention: Bold Love this year. A lot of you probably know my story over the last year. It was just a year ago when I was diagnosed with a pretty serious cancer. It's been a tough year—a lot of pain and difficulties and some pretty close calls where things weren't looking good—but here I am a year later, still going through treatment. (I just hooked up to my chemo pump right now.) It was interesting timing because the week I got the diagnosis was the week we were finishing up a series going through the story of Joseph in Genesis. I was putting together a lesson on the idea that God takes bad things, turns them around, and uses them for good. I shared with the group that while I knew the next season in my life would be one with a lot of pain and difficulties, I knew it could also be one filled with great hope and love.

And I've seen that over the last year: God showing his love to me in strengthening me through this time. Despite the chemo that I've been going through, for the most part I've been up and around like nothing's wrong. I'm still going to work, still planning on going down to Camp Arev to help next month. I don't think it's normal for cancer patients to be this strong going through treatment, but God's been sustaining me.

It's also been amazing to see the love of the church during this time: the prayer sessions for me and the families coming by with tons of food for me and my parents. So many people have come to me to ask how they can help. And part of the love God shows us is the people he puts in our lives to help us through the hard times. I don't know what the next few years will hold for me, but I know God has brought me this far, and none of these circumstances will separate us from the love of God.

THE SCARS OF JESUS SERMON

John 20:24-31:

24 Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” 26 A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” 27 Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” 28 Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” 29 Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” 30 Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

The entire history of creation was leading up to this point. From the fall of Adam to the choosing of Abraham, from the rescue of Israel from slavery in Egypt to their return from exile in Babylon, everything was leading up to this moment: the death and resurrection of Jesus. The sacrifice that saves every one of us who put our faith in God. It’s a story you can read repeatedly and not get bored. The story has so much emotion as we go from doubt and fear to hope and courage. We see in the different gospels that the disciples had difficulty believing Jesus had come back to life. Often we criticize Thomas the most, because of this story we just read. Many people focus on Thomas and say, “We shouldn’t be like Thomas because he was doubting.” The truth is that all the disciples had doubts in the beginning. Look at the version in Mark 16:9-14:

When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. 10 She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. 11 When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it. 12 Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. 13 These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either. 14 Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.

Let’s look also at Luke 24:36-45:

36 While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." 37 They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. 38 He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? 39 Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." 40 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. 41 And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate it in their presence. 44 He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." 45 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

Look at his hands and feet. I find it very interesting that the things that Thomas wants to see are the scars. Do you see that? He doesn't want to see Jesus do a miracle. He doesn't want to listen to Jesus preach a sermon. He's only going to believe if he sees the scars.

Scars are something I think about a lot. Before discussing Thomas and Jesus, I want to share a little about myself. I was fifteen years old when my life completely changed. Up until that point, I was just a normal kid. I went to school and studied hard to get good grades. I had been having much pain in my back for a few months, but we didn't think it was severe. When the pain got worse, eventually I went to the doctor to figure out what was wrong. I remember that day so clearly. That day we learned that the reason I had pain was because I had cancer. It had spread throughout my entire body and almost destroyed my spine. The doctors thought I wouldn't be able to walk. But praise God, after a year of treatment, not only was the cancer gone, but I was still able to walk. It's strange to think about because, usually, children don't think much about death. When we're young, we're focused on the bright future we have in front of us. I was enjoying my life. I had no idea that my life was in such danger.

You can still feel a little dent in my back where I'm missing part of my spine. I have many scars on my back from the surgeries I had. I have some scars on my chest from where the doctors gave me the medicine I needed to survive. For many years after that, I always tried to hide those scars. I didn't want anyone to see them. Even though people knew that I had almost died, I didn't want there to be anything to remind me about it. In the United States, there are many people like that. People are ashamed of their scars. They do so many things to hide them. Scars are a reminder of the pain we went through. They're a reminder that our bodies aren't perfect. I think there is a part of each of us that knows that God created us to be perfect and holy. Maybe we don't like scars because they remind us that we're not perfect. They remind us of our failures.

And here we have Jesus coming back to life with scars. Usually, our picture of resurrection is with a new, perfect, glorified body. Read what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:35-57:

35 But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?” 36 How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. 37 When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. 38 But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. 39 Not all flesh is the same: People have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. 40 There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. 41 The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor. 42 So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; 43 it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; 44 it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. 45 So it is written: “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. 46 The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. 47 The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. 48 As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. 49 And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.

50 I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 51 Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— 52 in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. 54 When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

55 “Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?”[i]

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Bible promises that we will be brought back with new bodies that won't grow old or get sick. All of those old scars of mine will be gone and forgotten. Isn't it interesting, though, that Jesus

keeps his scars? He still has holes in his hands where the nails went through. He still has a hole in his side where a spear pierced his heart. Let's look at one more passage in Revelation 5:1-11:

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. 2 And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" 3 But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. 4 I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. 5 Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."

6 Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. 7 He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. 8 And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp, and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. 9 And they sang a new song, saying:

"You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.
10 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth."

There are so many beautiful things in this vision John has of heaven. People from every language and nation worship God together in total unity. But look at this lion. A lion that is also a lamb. Of course we know this is Jesus. But what I find amazing is that he seems like he has been slain. There's some kind of mark or some kind of scar. Do you ever think about that? We usually think of Jesus as the conquering king, clothed in white and in glory. Yet, in John's vision of heaven, there's something else. Even in heaven, we can see the suffering that he went through for us. We can still see that he had been slain.

Perhaps someone might see it as a weakness. We don't like our own scars. Someone might ask why we would worship a God who was killed. But these scars tell us something more significant. The scars are like a love letter from someone who cares about us. Look at Isaiah 53:

Who has believed our message
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
2 He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
And like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
Nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
3 He was despised and rejected by humanity,
A man of suffering and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
He was despised, and we held him in low esteem.
4 Surely he took up our pain
And bore our suffering,
Yet we considered him punished by God,
Stricken by him and afflicted.
5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The punishment that brought us peace was on him,
And by his wounds, we are healed.
6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to our way;
And the Lord has laid on him
The iniquity of us all.
7 He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
He was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
So he did not open his mouth.
8 By oppression and judgment, he was taken away.
Yet, who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
For the transgression of my people, he was punished.
9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
Though he had done no violence,
Nor was any deceit in his mouth.
10 Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
And though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin,
He will see his offspring and prolong his days,
And the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.

11 After he has suffered,
 he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
By his knowledge, my righteous servant will justify many,
 And he will bear their iniquities.
12 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
 And he will divide the spoils with the strong,
Because he poured out his life unto death,
 And was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
 And she made intercession for the transgressors.

Every time we look at the scars on Jesus, we look at his love for us. We all, at one point, had been separated from God because of our sins. Now, through this sacrifice, we are brought near to him. I wonder if Thomas realized that. When he demanded to see the scars on Jesus, what he was really demanding was proof of God's love for him. Isn't that what we all feel sometimes?

Don't we sometimes go through life with that question, "God, do you see me?" "God, do you really love me?" And what does Jesus do? He answers Thomas' prayer. Maybe some people would want to criticize Thomas for this. The truth is, I have felt like Thomas many times in my life. Times when the pain and the struggles are so great that we don't know if we can go forward. I also think of Moses in Exodus 33 when God tells them to enter the promised land. God was angry with them because they had rebelled against them, so He said He would not go with them. Moses cries out to God, saying, "If you don't go with us, don't send us." Moses wants to know that God is close to and watching over them. Isn't that what we want too? Isn't that what Thomas wants?

Thomas demands to see the scars, and Jesus comes to him. When Thomas is at his lowest, Jesus comes with the proof of his love. He does precisely what Thomas needs to restore his hope. He does the same for us when we cry out to him. Those scars are a sign that his love for us knows no limitations. That he endured great pain and suffering for each one of us.

STRENGTH AND COURAGE: JOSHUA DEVOTIONAL

Originally published September 16, 2022

Have you ever faced a situation that seemed too difficult for you? A challenge that you didn't think you could face, a problem that seemed insurmountable. We're starting a new series this week, going through the book of Joshua, which describes the events after the Israelites left Egypt and began to set up their nation. Moses, one of the most potent prophets and leaders in the Bible, has passed away, and now it's up to Joshua to take his place as leader of the nation. He has some pretty big shoes to fill. How will he replace the most outstanding leader his people have ever seen?

At the beginning of the book of Joshua, we see God speak to Joshua—in Joshua 1:7-9:

“Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

Notice that the thing God directs Joshua to encourage him to be strong is the Bible; the books Moses had written under God's direction. Rather than focus on the situation they're in—the enemy nations that want to kill them and the uncertainty of how they'll get resources—God wants Joshua to fix his attention on the words God has already given. God is unchanging and powerful. As our gaze is fixed on Him, the problems of this world just don't seem so bad anymore.

We all go through times like this when our challenges seem too difficult to handle. My fiancé Lara and I were both thinking about this topic last week, thinking about this passage, and a scene came to our minds from the Lord of the Rings. This is early on in the story, when Frodo has volunteered to travel to a perilous land in order to destroy the evil ring of Sauron, and he's afraid. This is a far more dangerous challenge than he ever imagined, and in despair, he sits next to Gandalf, saying, “I wish it need not have happened in my time.”

“So do I,” Gandalf responds, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

We all will struggle with this emotion at some point: “Why do I have to go through this? Why can't life be simple without these problems?” As Armenians, maybe we're thinking about this even more now that Azerbaijan is again attacking Armenia while the rest of the world abandons us. With everything else we've been through as a people, why do we again face an enemy that wants nothing short of a genocide? You can let that emotion overwhelm you, or you can focus on the promises and character of God, who sees us through these difficult times. Our strength comes from focusing on God's word and His commands—because then we can see clearly what to do with

the time that is given to us. Frodo had his mission, and we have our own missions too. And just like in Lord of the Rings, we have our promise that evil will one day be eradicated, and God will claim the final victory. No matter what happens, we're on the winning side, and that is an encouraging thought.

JOINING THE RIGHT SIDE: JOSHUA DEVOTIONAL

Originally published October 1, 2022

Every good master villain needs an army of minions to command, and there are few armies of minions more iconic than the stormtroopers of Star Wars. Always wearing their armor, faces masked, training their whole lives for battle, they are a powerful force to be reckoned with...unless they're shooting at the protagonists, in which case they can never seem to hit a target...

That's what makes the opening of *The Force Awakens* so interesting. As we start getting introduced to the new characters in the story, we find a stormtrooper, FN-2187, deciding that he doesn't want to stay on the bad-guy team anymore. When the First Order captures a resistance fighter, he takes the opportunity to free him and escape together.

Going through Joshua this week, we were looking at the story of Rahab, who decides to hide the visiting Israelites and ask them for protection when Israel attacks to take Jericho. At first glance, she seems like a traitor to her city. Rather than turn these Israelites in, she lies to the officials of the town and says that the men have already left, sending the officials off on a wild goose chase. As we learn more, though, she reveals that in fact the whole city is in fear, knowing that God's judgment on them is coming. They know what happened to Egypt 40 years ago; they know what happened to some of the other nearby nations when they tried to attack the Israelites when they were in a weaker state; and now the Israelites are at the doorstep of Jericho, ready to cross over the Jordan river for the attack.

But Rahab realizes it's not too late to join the winning side. It's not too late to repent from the life she was living as a prostitute in the city and turn to God. This option was always on the table; it was an option that was available to every person in Jericho and every town. Joshua led his people to fight. We see this later in the book of Joshua. Rahab and her family aren't the only ones to turn around and decide to join God's people. And Rahab's family isn't just awarded with safety. We find out later that Rahab marries an Israelite from the tribe of Judah, a man named Salmon. You remember the story of Ruth we talked about a few months ago, and a man named Boaz? Rahab was Boaz's mother, and she's listed in Jesus's genealogy—a pretty astonishing turnaround for someone living an immoral life in a sinful city.

And that's one of the things we need to remember as Christians: God loves the humble, repentant heart. 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 says:

“So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he

has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Those who are in Christ are a new creation, and it's never too late for a turnaround. I often see people who are convinced that they are too far gone to be saved, that God would never welcome a sinner like them into His midst. Even more, I've seen Christians who look at others thinking, "Oh, that person? They're too far gone. It's too late for them to turn things around." And that's just not true. The offer of salvation extends to everyone, and as followers of Christ, we should never turn away anyone who seeks it. Just like Finn, who decides to leave the life of evil behind him, we want to see more people choose to walk away from the path that will inevitably result in destruction-by-exploding-death-star.

THE SCARS THAT STILL REMAIN

Originally published on Medium on April 25th, 2015

There's this interesting little clip I saw years ago, centered on Batman receiving training not to feel pain. He goes to a woman named Cassandra to learn how to become immune to pain. As they are discussing, he sees her stop and just stand on a spot of burning ground, and asks her if it hurts. As they continue discussing it, he asks a very interesting question: "Does it scar?" She responds, "Bruce, what pain doesn't?"

Most of us will acquire at least some scars throughout our lives. Some through silly things, reckless games, careless mistakes, dumb choices, and more. Some might have a more serious story, however. Scars are something that I think about often, having been left with so many after going through a year with cancer. I have a large scar on my back from surgery and a massive infection, and a scar on my chest from the port that was installed for chemo and later removed. I was too self-conscious about them for years afterward to take my shirt off at the beach. I have minor scars, too, from silly things in life: a little scar on my lip from when a cat scratched me when I was two years old and even an almost invisible scar on my right little finger from the time I slashed my hand with a pocket knife cutting something in Haiti. Each scar has its own story and its pain. For some people, scars are a reminder of the pain they endured, while for others, it's a reminder of the difficulties they have overcome.

The Sunday Jesus rose from the dead, it took some convincing for even the people who saw Him to believe He had come back to life. If you read the gospel accounts of Luke and John, you see some interesting details of Jesus' first interactions with his disciples after He came back to life. The very first thing he does is show them His scars; before He eats anything; before they have any real conversation. He shows them His hands, feet, and side. John adds an interesting detail about Thomas, who hadn't been there during Jesus' crucifixion. When Thomas heard the story, he responded, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." He doesn't ask to see His face, see Him eat, or even see Him perform a miracle. He demands to see the scars.

Sure enough, one week later, Jesus comes back, and goes right to Thomas. "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side." One week later, the scars were still there, so Thomas would believe. I think there's something powerful in this demonstration. Most people go through life hating scars. They do everything they can to avoid or hide them. Entire fields of surgery are devoted to removing scars. Here we have Jesus with a new, resurrected body. He didn't need to keep those scars. There is no rule that says you keep all the wounds that you have when you are brought back to life in the final resurrection.

On the contrary, the description from the apostles paints a picture of new, perfect, glorified bodies that don't decay. Jesus, however, didn't take that. He didn't accept a body with no record of what He had done. He didn't take a body that had no stories to tell. He came with a body that had the marks reminding everyone of all the pain He had endured. He kept these scars so Thomas and all the others could believe, and by extension, so we would believe.

There's a song by "Mercy Me" called "Nails in Your Hands" with some compelling lyrics that always comes to mind when I think of this:

The nails in your hands
the nail in your feet
they tell me how much you love me
The thorns on your brow
they tell me how
you bore so much shame to love me
And when the heavens pass away
all your scars will still remain
and forever they will say how much you love me

We often think of the crucifixion as something Jesus endured for a few hours and then was done. After that he was shiny and smiling and super-powered, right? That's not the story these scars tell or the story we see after Jesus' resurrection. When John describes the end times in Revelation, he says he saw "a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain" at the throne. Even at Heaven's throne, the wounds were still there. Those wounds didn't last just a week, and they went much deeper than just His hands and feet.

Judging from typical church attendance trends, it's fair to say that the vast majority of people in the U.S. think about Jesus hurting and dying for about a week out of the year and then forget about it until next year. But even though most people stop thinking about Jesus and the resurrection after Easter week, the truth is that Jesus was up and around interacting with people for more than three weeks after he rose from the dead. It took work to convince people like Thomas that He wasn't dead. All that time, as near as we can tell, He walked around with those scars for everyone to see. It's no wonder that even today, we're still fixated on them. For the Christian, those scars are everything. The God of all creation endured a pain for us so great that it leaves scars until this very day.

Sometimes, it's fun to wonder about what Heaven will be like. New sights, new sounds, maybe even new senses we could never have imagined. We can picture new bodies with all the scars of our past pains gone and forgotten, with only the future to look forward to. But I wonder, too, if

this song really captures what we'll see seated around the throne of God, with a new heaven and a new earth, all of our own scars and our own pains long gone, yet seeing those scars of Jesus still there, for all eternity. And forever they will tell the story of a God who paid a penalty we could never hope to pay, to give us a reward we could never hope to earn.

HOPE IN DARK TIMES DEVOTIONAL

Originally published June 2022

It's a beautiful day today; the sun's out with a nice cool breeze. I just had my chemo treatment on Monday, and I'm still hooked up to it and feeling pretty good, but I thought it would be nice to continue some thoughts from my sermon on Sunday. At church, I talked about how Jehoram took over as king after Jehoshaphat died, and today, I want to look at what happened after. Unlike Jehoshaphat, Jehoram was pretty evil and did many messed up things. It's not surprising, given that he first kills off his own siblings when he gets power.

Just to set the stage here, the time is around 850 BC. The Israelites are split into two nations: the northern and southern kingdoms. In the kingdom's north, Ahab and Jezebel are ruling, and they are two of the most evil people in the Bible. In the south, you have Jehoshaphat, a good, rigorous king. But for whatever reason, he decides to ally with Ahab and Jezebel and has his son Jehoram marry their daughter Athaliah. After Jehoshaphat dies and Jehoram and Athaliah take over, they become more like Ahab and Jezebel than Jehoshaphat and start doing many evil things. The result was the southern kingdom getting weaker, enemy nations began attacking them and stealing stuff, and in the end, almost all of Jehoram's kids are killed. Jehoram dies of an excruciating illness. 2 Chronicles 21:20 says he died "to no one's regret," which is just such a sad ending. Nobody was sorry he was gone. All that's left is his youngest son, Ahaziah, who becomes king at twenty-two. He kept up this alliance with Ahab's son, Joram, who would have been his uncle. He didn't even last a year as king before he got himself killed.

That's when things started looking bad. As soon as Ahaziah gets killed, Athaliah moves for power, and tries to claim the nation for herself. She starts killing everyone who could have some claim to the throne, all her own family members, even her own grandchildren, with the goal of setting herself up as queen. And she almost succeeded. The line of David was almost completely wiped out...except for one.

You see, Jehoram and Athaliah also had a daughter, Jehosheba, and she didn't follow in their footsteps. She, instead, chooses the path of righteousness despite the evil of her parents. She's married to the high priest, Jehoiada, and they will do what they can to prevent the nation from being destroyed. So in a desperate move, Jehosheba grabs her newborn nephew, Ahaziah's son Joash, and runs away with him. As Athaliah continues her evil reign, Jehosheba, Jehoiada, and Joash hide at the temple and wait for the right time to act.

Knowing how to act in such dangerous and hopeless times can be challenging. By going against her mother like this, Jehosheba is risking her own life, and we know Athaliah is more than willing to kill off her own family to gain power. What causes us to have hope when there's no way forward?

I imagine Jehosheba might have been reminding herself of the promises God made to her ancestor, King David, centuries before her. In 2 Samuel, 7:16, God promises David, “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.” It can be challenging to believe God’s promises when the situation looks bad, especially when it seems impossible for the pledge to happen. God promises that David’s line will remain, but now there’s only one baby left after Athaliah’s murder spree. How is God supposed to keep his promise now?

But Jehosheba and Jehoiada continue to have faith that God will stay true to His word, and after six years, they find an opportunity to make a move. They gather around enough people for support that they’re able to overthrow Athaliah (actually, it wasn’t that hard; she was super evil, and everyone hated her), and the entire nation celebrates as seven-year-old Joash is set up as king. And what does this seven-year-old king do? Undoes all of the messed up stuff his father and grandparents had done, and with the guidance of his aunt and uncle, who raised him as their child, sets the nation back on the right course.

In life, we’ll all face hopeless situations from a human perspective. Whether it’s school, work, or medical, we will face problems beyond our ability to handle. Six years of a murderous psychopath running a country seems pretty hopeless. But like Jehosheba and Jehoiada, we need to remind ourselves of God's promises. Even if we don’t know what to do, or don’t know how to act. Holding on to the promise can be enough to keep us calm and patient during uncertain times. And, if God can use a seven-year-old to change the course of an entire country, how much more can God help us through our own situations? So this week, think about God's different promises in the Bible, maybe even write them down and keep them somewhere, and use them to encourage you during difficult times.

IT'S A HARD KNOCK LIFE: DEVOTIONAL BY MATT AND LARA SILVERMAN

Originally published January 2023

“It's a hard-knock life for us.
It's a hard-knock life for us.
'Stead of treated
We get tricked
'Stead of kisses
We get kicked
It's a hard-knock life.”

In the classic American musical *Annie*, we see an orphan struggling with the sorrow of being abandoned by her parents and living in a place that isn't her home. She's living in a dumpy orphanage with a caretaker who isn't very caring. All the children there are longing to find a proper home finally. This temporary residence isn't where they belong.

This week we looked more at Matthew 9 and 10, and we see Jesus sending his disciples out with a warning. While up to this point, they've mostly been experiencing favor from people seeking miracles and healings from Jesus, Jesus tells them that in the future, they're going to experience great persecution and rejection. Abandonment from friends and family, suffering and hardship...following Jesus was not going to be all fun and comfort.

One of the things we need to understand when following God is that we're living in a world that has largely rejected God. People may like it when Jesus is giving them free stuff, but when it comes to actually following God, people typically walk away, chasing after their own desires. So as we follow God here on earth, we find we don't really fit in. In the same way, the orphans in *Annie* are suffering, living in a place that isn't their home; we, as Christians, are living in a world we don't belong in. We suffer because this isn't our true home.

But how do we have joy in the midst of this suffering? There's an interesting scene in the book of Acts where the apostles start to experience real opposition to the teachings and miracles. In chapter 5, they're threatened to stop preaching and are all flogged. Yet look how they respond in Acts 5:41-42:

“The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. 42 Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.”

Rather than feeling shame or depression, they feel joy because, in their suffering, they're even closer to Jesus and even more focused on their eternal reward. Maybe the disciples were applying

that important mandate from *Annie* that you're never fully dressed without a smile. Hmmmm. Well, I'm not sure if that was quite the reasoning they were using at that moment, but I'm sure there's an application in there somewhere...

Indeed, God commands us to rejoice in our suffering, and the Christian hope of eternal glory allows us to do just that.

1 Peter 4:12-13: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."

This suffering is doing two things. One, it draws us closer to Christ because we share in his suffering. We know that we belong to him, and have great confidence that he is walking through the difficulties with us. The closer we draw to Christ, the more we experience his love and grace. There's a great line in Psalm 34 about God being near the brokenhearted.

The second thing suffering does is direct our attention even more toward our heavenly home. It reminds us that this temporary world isn't where we belong; we look forward to something greater. Because your suffering has placed your focus on eternal things rather than the mere temporary pleasure of this world, you finally have real and lasting hope. The kind that cannot fade.

You know in your heart that with God, "the sun'll come out tomorrow." And that hope gives us joy today because we know our hardships aren't for nothing. So have confidence knowing Jesus went through the same things, and he promises us a true home where we really belong.

REAL AND LASTING JOY

Originally broadcast December 2020

I remember the day that marked the fifth anniversary of finishing chemotherapy after my first cancer. It was a special day because our criteria was that once I was in remission for a full five years, I was officially cured. I had great joy as I shared with the Wednesday night Bible study group in Los Angeles that I was officially done with that phase of my life, and a new phase had begun. In a sense, it was like passing from death into a new life.

The joy we see in stories as people encounter this child Jesus is much the same: the realization that a new life has begun. No longer under the curse of death, we now see our salvation and eternal life. And really, that's what joy is. Joy isn't being happy with our situation or getting everything we want. It doesn't depend on us being in control or completely understanding what is happening. But we realize one thing: a new, reborn life is now here, and we have it. It can't be taken away; it lasts for eternity. That's why we can have joy, even in the pain and confusion, because we know we have something far more significant. The pleasure of hitting the mark of being five years cancer-free was great, but even more incredible was the joy the night I became a follower of Jesus.

THE SOUND OF WORSHIP: DEVOTIONAL BY MATT AND LARA SILVERMAN

Originally published February 2023

“When the dog bites, when the bee stings, when I’m feeling sad, I simply remember my favorite things, and then I don’t feel so bad.”

In the classic musical *Sound of Music*, we find a musically talented nun, Maria Von Trapp, coming to the home of a widowed captain to help raise the children and keep the home running smoothly. Things are difficult at first; the captain has become hardened and strict after the loss of his wife, and there is very little joy in the home. Yet Maria slowly transforms the home as she brings music back, reminding the family that music uplifts the soul and allows us to persevere.

We’ve been talking about how Jesus is king, and one of the ways we worship this king is through song. Music is a gift from God that allows us to connect with God more deeply as our hearts and voices align to direct attention to God.

We were made to worship. It’s the key to our hearts and how our souls are wired. It’s a thirst, and deep longing God has placed inside every human. And God has a purpose for it separate from his own praise: When we plug in to the Lord’s charging power by spending time with him, the very act of worship changes us and transforms our hearts to be more Christ-like. It does so by intentionally focusing our time and hearts on the essential things - the glory of God, adoring him in all his majesty, and praising him for his creation and love for us. When Moses spent time one on one with God on the mountain, he came back down with a glowing countenance-one that reflected the beauty and radiant glory of the God he had just worshipped. I think you’ve all probably had similar experiences where you’ve spent precious, intimate time with the Lord, and you leave with your face shining radiantly with great joy and Christ-like hope. We can also think of our own mountain top experiences, maybe at Camp Arev. These times of deep worship and communion with God and his people grow our faith and make us holier.

Another beautiful side effect is that a worship-centered day and life helps you cope with and heal from your current or past suffering. It does so by shifting our focus away from temporal earthly things to the long-lasting and permanent eternal gifts and love God has in store for us. In chapter 16 of Acts, we find Paul and Silas in prison, falsely accused of causing a massive disturbance in the city. But look at verse 25: “About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.”

Beaten and chained, they’re singing praises to God, and everyone around them is listening. In times of great distress, singing these worship songs helps us persevere and encourages others around us.

Ephesians 5:19-20 has a significant challenge for us: “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Singing isn't just for us; it's also part of how we interact with others and remind them of the goodness of God.

One of the most well-known songs in the Sound of Music is that song about favorite things. Think about your favorite things; you won't feel so bad. Of course, the things Maria lists, like snowflakes and whiskers on kittens, are not the powerful things that genuinely give us hope in the hardships of life. The things we sing about as Christians are the attributes and victories of God: God, who rescues the sinner; Jesus, who conquers death. As we sing these words, we remind ourselves that God is more significant than our circumstances.

You guys know I go to Haiti pretty regularly, and one of our favorite hymns to sing together when we're there is “Because He Lives.” The lyrics are: Because he lives, I can face tomorrow, because he lives, all fear is gone, because I know he holds the future, and life is worth the living just because he lives.

In moments of despair and grief, when it seems like there's no point in trying any more, those words give hope. So as we sing in church, think about these good things. Let them encourage and ground you as we continue to follow Jesus as our king.

So, you want to know how to worship? It's easy; let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start. When you read you begin with ABC, when you praise you begin with Do Re Me...

PROMISE OF VICTORY SERMON

April 2019, Calvary Armenian Congregational Church

2 Kings 13:14-19:

14 Now Elisha had been suffering from the illness from which he died. Jehoash king of Israel went down to see him and wept over him. “My father! My father!” he cried. “The chariots and horsemen of Israel!”

15 Elisha said, “Get a bow and some arrows,” and he did so. 16 “Take the bow in your hands,” he said to the king of Israel. When he had taken it, Elisha put his hands on the king’s hands.

17 “Open the east window,” he said, and he opened it. “Shoot!” Elisha said, and he shot. “The Lord’s arrow of victory, the arrow of victory over Aram!” Elisha declared. “You will completely destroy the Arameans at Aphek.”

18 Then he said, “Take the arrows,” and the king took them. Elisha told him, “Strike the ground.” He struck it three times and stopped. 19 The man of God was angry with him and said, “You should have struck the ground five or six times; then you would have defeated Aram and completely destroyed it. But now you will defeat it only three times.”

I’m glad to be back from my Haiti trip; good to see you all, and I am happy to share God’s word today. Let me start with a little question for you to think about. What would you do if God came down and promised you a victory? Any victory, anything you wanted. The next thing you did, you would ultimately succeed. Would you start a business? Go back to college to get an excellent degree? Just buy a lottery ticket? Would you start a church? Would you find a big stadium, fill it with ten thousand people, and give a sermon to them? Would you go out to a forgotten people in a foreign land who have no hope and share God’s word with them? And how far would you be willing to go to pursue that victory? Keep those questions in mind as we jump into our story here.

So here’s a little history background. We’re talking a little after 800 BC here—eight hundred years before Jesus. We’re looking at the prophet Elisha, who took over for the prophet Elijah. These guys were prophets during some of the most challenging times of the nation of Israel. They were active during the times of Ahab and Jezebel when prophets of God were actively being hunted and killed in the northern kingdom of Israel. The kingdom had been split in two since the days of Solomon, with the southern kingdom of Judah usually being a little closer to God than the northern kingdom of Israel. Elisha was a prophet operating in the northern kingdom with a lot of power. A lot of miracles, healings, bringing people back to life, multiplying food, taking out entire armies, you know, standard prophet stuff. Again, he took over for Elijah, a mighty prophet who

went up against the 850 prophets of Jezebel's Gods. It was a tough life, though: constantly feeling alone, always being outnumbered, always having someone out there who wanted to kill you. So God brings Elisha to follow Elijah, learn from him, and support him. And Elijah keeps going, fighting the good fight, and running the race, until his time is done.

On Elijah's last day, Elisha would not leave his side, followed him everywhere, and asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit, of his power. And he gets it and goes with it. We get this fantastic scene with Elijah being taken up to heaven in chariots of fire, and now it's Elisha's turn to go to work. But now we get to the end of Elisha's life. He's fought the good fight, he ran the race, and now it's time to move on to the reward. And sure enough, we have another guy here with him, Jehoash the king of Israel. It's a little interesting that Jehoash is here crying over Elisha. It's interesting because nothing about Jehoash demonstrates that he cares at all about God. The Bible says very little about him. All we know is that he lasted sixteen years and did evil in the eyes of the Lord. There's one battle recorded where he fought against the southern kingdom of Judah when Amaziah was king, and then we have this story.

It raises an interesting question. Why would a king who has no interest in God or God's commands be there at the death of a prophet weeping for him? The Bible doesn't say why he's there, but I do have a guess. I'm sure the people at this time know the history of Elijah and Elisha. Elisha walks by Elijah, sees those flaming chariots coming, and cries, "My father, my father, the chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And here we have Jehoash, here at the death of Elisha, calling out, "My father, my father, the chariots and horsemen of Israel." Some people think it's just a reference to the military advantage of having a prophet on your country's side, like an "Oh no, what will our armies do if you aren't here" kind of thing. Maybe. You know what I think? I think Jehoash was there because he knew that Elisha was with Elijah when he inherited his power. I think Jehoash is thinking, "If you're with a prophet when he dies, and you say the right magic words, you get superpowers." I think Jehoash is at least aware that Elisha has some kind of power, and he's there trying to get at least some of it. He isn't interested in Elisha, isn't interested in God, isn't interested in seeking God's direction for his life; he's there to get some kind of power.

So, what does this scene look like? Do we have a good archer here? Who's my volunteer? So, you take the Lord's arrow of victory, and then you shoot. Then you take the arrows, and strike the ground three times. And he stops and looks at Elisha. Elisha shakes his head. Only three times? Ok, that's great, you can sit down. Awesome job. You see, I think we're all a little like Jehoash here.

We'll show up and take a little direction from God. He says go forward, and we take one or two steps and turn back and say, God, is this good? No, no, no, go forward. Two more steps. Ok, are we good here? We show up but stay on the edge, never really committing or sure what we believe. I've found that's true for many people. They go through some motions and know a few words to say, but most people you meet don't know what they believe. They'll identify with one religion or

another or say they're an atheist, but they've never really thought through what that would look like in their life. So here's Jehoash, showing up, going through the motions, but missing out on what God offered him. We are showing up and going through the motions but missing out on the full blessings. God's offering us a victory, but we're so focused on ourselves that we don't see it. I remember one missionary who talked about wanting to have just barely enough God in his life to get into heaven and make all his hopes and dreams come true without really having to change his life. He went on to become a missionary in some of the most dangerous countries in the world to share the gospel. So much for his plans?

If I had to guess, I'd say most people don't know what real victory looks like. People think of wealth or fame or power, titles, position, worldly treasure, saying, "If I just had that, boy, I'd have it made." Of course, you know none of that stuff lasts. You could have all the money in the world, but it could be gone in a day. You could be healthy one day and dying the next. Oh yeah, I know that feeling. So, what does real victory look like? What would you do if, whatever you chose to do, God would grant you success? Start a business? Get a degree? Buy a lottery ticket. Build a church? Preach a sermon? Go out to forgotten people in a foreign land who have no hope and share God's word with them.

We all know real victory isn't as superficial as getting a lot of money or becoming famous. We're not looking for a little triumph over some army; we're looking to heaven, to an eternal victory. I want to jump over to a bit of passage in Romans 8, verses 29 and 30:

"For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."

That's what real victory looks like: the transformation of our character as God shapes us, molds us, and makes us look more and more like Jesus. And I need to talk about this a little bit. I've noticed that many people in our churches can get a little upset when you look at verses like this. They get uneasy when you use the word predestined. I don't know if it's a misunderstanding, miscommunication, misrepresentation, or what. For some people, it conjures up this image like God is randomly flipping coins up in heaven and deciding who's destined for this and that. Some people look at this and decide, "Well, if God's already decided everything, why should I do anything?" Even arguing that there's no point in sharing the gospel with people because God will save whoever he's going to save. It's like that little joke article in the Babylon Bee, have you ever read that? It's a little Christian satire website article titled, "Calvinist Researchers Complete Development of Elect Detector," so they only share the gospel with people destined for salvation. A friend of mine had a funny but kind of sad story. He ran into some Christians at a university and asked them when their Bible study met because he was interested in checking out a Bible study. They actually wouldn't tell him, and their actual logic was, "If you were meant to come to our study, you'd find it." That's what they told him. He didn't go to their study, became a leader in

Chi Alpha, and came to UCLA to help start the Chi Alpha group I joined and traveled to Haiti with me.

That's not the point of these verses. These verses are a promise. They're a promise to you. To me. A promise to those of us who have put our hope in Jesus. A promise of victory. God will take each of the things in your life, the ups and the downs, the right and the wrong choices, your success, and your failure, and use them to transform your character. Listen to this very carefully because I want to communicate this clearly: God doesn't promise us victory so we'll stay home on our couch watching football or something on the day of battle. He promises us victory so that when the day of battle comes, when trials, struggles, and failures attack, we'll have the courage to stand and move forward. Let me say it again: God doesn't give us the promise of victory so that when the day of battle comes, we'll run off and hide in a corner and say, "Oh, God's going to win, so I'll just hide over here." He promises us victory so that when the day of battle comes, we'll stand and endure. We're no longer held back by a fear of failure, a fear that our weaknesses are too much to overcome. Now, look at verses 35 through 37:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

More than conquerors. Let that sink in. Think of conquest back then—Roman army. The Roman armies were conquerors. You met those guys on the battlefield; you're done. Forget it. They'll wipe you out. Paul says our victory is so complete you can't compare us to the Roman army. We're entirely beyond them. We've won even before we've even gone out to the battlefield. That is God's promise to you who have put your trust in Him; no weapon forged against you will succeed, no giant will stop your advance, and no enemy can ever take God's promise away. It's our destiny to win. If that rubs you the wrong way and you're still unsure how to think about that, see me and talk to me afterward. I'll be around. Don't send some angry email about how the guy said predestination in his sermon or something like that; sit down and talk with me, and maybe I can share some of my own experiences, some of the things God has done in my life, that have helped me understand these things a little.

So we push forward, looking toward that victory, to that transformation of our character into the likeness of Christ. Last summer, I spoke at the juniors retreat at Camp Arev, and I had a little Q&A time for the kids to ask me questions. One of the kids wrote this one, wholly misspelled of course, asking, "What does heaven look like?" It looks like this: our lives are transformed as children of God. That's the victory that we push forward to. Paul writes about this transformation of our character like this in Philippians 3:12-16:

“Not that I have already obtained all this or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.”

On the one hand, we have this victory from God, this destiny. God has a direction for your life. You aren't a mistake. You aren't an afterthought; you aren't someone God has forgotten. God has a purpose for your life, work he's prepared in advance for each of us to do. On the other hand, like we were saying all week down in Haiti, life is about choices, decisions, and consequences. On the one hand, life is about the plans and purposes of God, but on the other hand, life is about choices, decisions, and consequences. How those two things come together is a mystery, but don't let that discourage you or turn you away. Chase after the things of God. Press on. Don't just strike the ground three times; don't even strike it six times; keep striking until God says, “Ok, that's enough, you're good.”

So, what does that look like in our lives? It means not just praying for a quick little five seconds before you eat and before you go to sleep. It means praying to connect with God, to worship him, and to lift others up in prayer. Pray until you run out of things to pray about, then call someone else up and ask them how you can pray for them. It means reading the Bible until our minds become so filled with scripture that it starts coming out of our mouths. Every word we speak is fueled by the Bible and is spoken to heal, restore, and build. It means not just reading to memorize but reading to understand. You could have all the scriptures memorized in the original Hebrew language; it doesn't matter if you don't understand any of it, right? It means not just giving a little dollar here in there for offering or to someone in need; it means giving until it starts making you uncomfortable and thinking, can I really afford to give this much? And then, give just a little bit more. It means to speak words that lift other people and are carefully selected to encourage and heal. We are not gossiping, talking behind other people's backs, or spreading slander and rumors that tear down someone's reputation. It means looking for God's purpose in our lives, and not just seeking out our pleasures.

Why did Jehoash stop hitting the ground three times? It probably felt a little silly. A king, hitting the ground because an old dying guy told him to. There are going to be things that come along that will make us want to stop. I remember that day I was talking to my first PhD advisor at UCLA, and he decided that I couldn't pursue my PhD if God were still the priority in my life. “Well, what will it be, PhD or church?”

After that meeting, I went up to the roof of the engineering building to pray. I tell you, are you going through some rough times? Find a good roof to go up to pray. During that season of my life,

I started every morning up on that roof, a good thirty minutes just praying and worshiping. And I asked God what I should do. The answer I got from God was, “Just keep doing what you’re doing.” I said, God, this will be my last quarter here if I keep doing that. And God’s response to that: “Yes, keep doing it anyway.” I didn’t like that answer. It put me in a bad mood the rest of that day. Sometimes God doesn’t give us the answer we want, that’s ok. Sure enough, that professor kicked almost all of us out of his lab at the end of that quarter. It was a mess, but that’s a story for another time. But I will say that one of the questions I wrestled with during that season of my life, a season of just one setback after another, was if I come out of all this looking like a fool and a failure, but God is glorified, will I be ok with that? If people looked at my life and said, “man that guy is a lost cause, but wow, God is amazing.” This is learning how to keep our gaze on God and not be sidetracked by our own reputation. Looking for the true victory, and not the trivial superficial things.

Do I have time to say one last thing? One last little victory? One of the kids from Haiti. His name was Dickenson. I told you about him last year, didn’t I? He was born with HIV; he got it from his mom. We got there last summer, and he was fourteen years old with advanced AIDS. At that point, he was just skin and bones, and I don’t think he weighed even sixty pounds. You don’t want to see a picture of his appearance then. We prayed for him, prayed for the family, got him to the hospital, and paid for his medication. We did everything we could, but I knew that when you get to that point, unless there’s some crazy miracle, you don’t have much longer. Not in Haiti, at least. On October 27, he passed away. Now, you may say, where’s the victory there? How can you say God promises victory when you have those kinds of losses?

Let me tell you something I’ve learned. The Bible sometimes talks about life being a battle, but it also sometimes talks about life being like a marathon. Like a race, we’re running. But as much as we want to finish that race together with our friends and family, we’re not all going to get to the finish line simultaneously. But even if someone gets to the finish line before you, keep running, keep pressing forward, because you know they’ll be waiting for you at that finish line.

So don’t just strike the ground three times, or four times. Keep striking the ground until the ground just gives way. And I know, some of you, you’ve been going at it, striking the ground again and again, and you don’t know how much longer you can keep going. Keep your eyes fixed on God; he’s going to renew your strength, and carry you forward.

And some of you are may be thinking, I can’t imagine doing that, just striking the ground again and again; I don’t think I can do it. I can’t pray every day; I can’t read the Bible every day. Just hit the ground one more time. Don’t try to pray daily; just set aside fifteen minutes every couple of days to pray and seek God. If you don’t think you can attend a Bible study every week, try once or twice a month. If you don’t think you can control the words coming out of your mouth and can’t be disciplined in your speech, start by trying to be disciplined in what you write. Write to people,

and carefully choose words to build and lift each other up. Just try to strike the ground one more time and see the results.

And maybe there's someone here who isn't sure what they believe. You're hearing these stories, but you don't know what it means to be pursuing God. If that's you, come talk with me after, or any of the other leaders.

PURSUIT OF VICTORY SERMON

October 2019, Calvary Armenian Congregational Church

2 Kings 13:14-19:

14 Now Elisha had been suffering from the illness from which he died. Jehoash king of Israel went down to see him and wept over him. “My father! My father!” he cried. “The chariots and horsemen of Israel!”

15 Elisha said, “Get a bow and some arrows,” and he did so. 16 “Take the bow in your hands,” he said to the king of Israel. When he had taken it, Elisha put his hands on the king’s hands.

17 “Open the east window,” he said, and he opened it. “Shoot!” Elisha said, and he shot. “The Lord’s arrow of victory, the arrow of victory over Aram!” Elisha declared. “You will completely destroy the Arameans at Aphek.”

18 Then he said, “Take the arrows,” and the king took them. Elisha told him, “Strike the ground.” He struck it three times and stopped. 19 The man of God was angry with him and said, “You should have struck the ground five or six times; then you would have defeated Aram and completely destroyed it. But now you will defeat it only three times.”

Well, it’s been a couple of months, but I finally get to finish the sermon I started in April. Part one is the promise of victory, and part two is the pursuit of victory. And these two things go hand in hand. As Christians, the reason we pursue victory with confidence is that we know the promises of God. You read the Bible, and the Bible is filled with the promises of God.

Deuteronomy 31:6: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.”

John 14:2-3: “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”

So, let’s go back to our king Jehoash and Elisha. Like I said last time, it’s a little odd that this king is here. This is not a God-fearing king. This isn’t a guy looking to do God’s will; nothing about his background makes us think he wants to follow Elisha’s guidance. But it seems like he’s here for something. He wants to see some miracle, some kind of power.

And interestingly, God gives him something—a chance. God gives him a promise and the opportunity to pursue it. But he stops. And he misses the full blessings God was offering. Maybe he was worried about how silly he would look, a king hitting the ground with arrows because an

old, sick guy told him to. Perhaps he didn't see the connection between his actions and the promise. But either way, he missed out.

Ever have those moments of regret? If only I had done it differently, right? A lot of the time, we look at our mistakes and failures in the past, and it keeps us from going forward into the promises.

Philippians 3:10-14: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

Paul was in prison when he wrote this. He had a past that he wasn't proud of, a past persecuting Christians. But he understands that tomorrow is a new day. He understands that he's on a journey, and there's a destination. Some people get so caught up in their past that it becomes a prison and traps them. So what do you do? You focus on the promise—the prize.

As I said in the last sermon, we're more than conquerors. We have victory secured because we trust in the one who has the power to save. We've won before we've even gotten onto the battlefield. If you ever want to see a crazy example of that in the Bible, look at 2 Chronicles chapter 20 if you have the time. There are three armies coming against Judah, and the Israelites are completely outmatched and outnumbered. God tells them, go on out; I will beat those armies. You don't even need to do anything; watch. The Israelites go out, they put the singers in front, they're singing "give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever." They get to the enemy, and as they get there, these three armies turn against each other, killing themselves off.

But what kind of victory are we chasing after? What kind of victory are we chasing after as a church? What kind of victory are you chasing after in your own life? I found this T-shirt on Amazon: he who dies with the most Hotwheels wins. Most tools? I think of Egyptian pharaohs burying themselves with their wealth, thinking they would take it with them. Ultimately, all their treasure ended up in museums for school field trips; kids walk by them and say, "This is boring. Do we have to look at all this old stuff?" The rest ended up with grave robbers, I guess.

Stop and think about that, for a second. This might sound a little harsh and make people a little upset to hear it, but this is the truth. If everything you chase after is going to be left behind after you die, your entire life invested in the things of this world, then that's an empty life you'll be living. We were meant to live for more than that. Wealth, fame, titles, strength; people keep chasing after these things. It lasts for a moment, and it's gone. People everywhere say, "If only I had that thing, my life would be complete. If only I had that house, if only I had that car, if only I

had that degree, if only I had that promotion, that thing, that thing.” And one by one, we find out how empty those things are, how meaningless the victory is.

What does victory look like in your life? What does it look like to pursue that victory?

2 Peter 1:3-8:

3 His divine power has given us everything we need for a Godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

5 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, Godliness; 7 and to Godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. 8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Man, I wish I had time to really talk about each of these things: goodness, knowledge, self-control, Godliness, and love. But I do want to say, some of you, listen, I know you don't think you have the strength to keep going. And it's sort of true, you don't, we don't. But God will give you the power; he will give you what you need to pursue your calling. But we need to build. We're not just leaving our faith at that basic beginner level; we're adding to it daily. As God gives us power, we're transforming our character, putting that faith into action, and impacting the lives of people all around us. So we're eager to add each of these things because we know that this is God's promise to us. And that's the real victory: the transformation of our character.

I think I showed this picture last time I preached. That guy translating for us there in Haiti, that's Daniel. He was a little kid when I first met him over ten years ago on my first mission trip. Now, he's one of the leaders in the area, and we're supporting him through college. Going back to the same village, the same orphanage, year after year, we've seen some significant victories. Total transformation of the area, with churches planting and growing. But we've had some times that have felt like losses, too. Friends we had been praying for, struggling with, and still they got called home earlier than we would have liked. Little kids that you would look at and think they've got so much ahead of them, and you're left looking up at God and asking, "Why them? Why so young?" Sometimes, it feels like you can't go forward because the pain of the loss is too much. There was one girl that passed away a few years ago. She had a beautiful singing voice. Some of the girls went and made a music CD of her singing a bunch of songs in Creole. That felt like a tough loss...but we started a bit of a tradition after that. We started singing more songs together in Creole with our friends, learning the words. Listen, can you recognize the tune?

“Because he lives, I can face tomorrow.” We just sang it, right? Think about the words. “He holds the future, so I can face tomorrow.” Think of a newborn child facing uncertain days. I tell you, we have a lot we can be afraid of. There are many things to worry about, especially here in San Francisco. We are worried about whether or not our child will grow up and get a job that can pay the bills. We are worried about affording a house: 2 million, 3 million, 4 million dollars. What kind of future will we have, what kind of future will our kids have here? Paying for an education, worried about student loans, what happens if something goes wrong? What happens if I get sick and insurance won’t cover it? I don’t pretend to have the answers to all those fears; they’re real fears. But I know we can face uncertain days, we can face the pain, and we can fight the fight because He lives.

Do you know anything about Ignatius? Bishop of Antioch in the early church. This was a guy who lived during the time of the apostles, who knew them and saw the lives they led and the deaths they died. And then 115 AD, he had his own turn; he was arrested by the Roman government and taken to Rome to...well. Listen to what he writes as he’s on his way, instructions he gives to the other Christians in Rome trying to prevent his execution:

“I’ll never again have an opportunity like this to reach God. Nor will you Romans ever again have such a chance to be credited with a finer accomplishment – provided you remain silent. For if you quietly refrain from interfering with me, I will become a crystal-clear message from God. But if you love my earthly body too much, I’ll only be an incomprehensible noise.”

Not all of us get to see the end of our life coming. It’s hard to imagine how we’ll face it when we do see it. Ignatius saw his end coming, and rather than run from it, he saw it as his witness to the world; he finished his race, knowing there was a crown waiting for him at the finish line.

What kind of legacy will we leave behind? What does victory look like for us as a church? Is it a successful year if we just balance our budget? Just money? I can tell you how to do that, you know. Easy way to balance a church budget, guaranteed. All you have to do is sell off all the property, get rid of all the staff, take all the money, put it in a big endowment fund, and never touch it. Just let it keep accumulating until we have a billion dollars. Now stop and think. There’s a part of you that’s saying, that’s not what church is supposed to be, that’s not victory. Because that part of you knows there’s a greater purpose and reason why we’re here. We’re here to bring a message to a world in desperate need. There are so many people out there that are desperately looking for something to hope in. They’re waiting for God to do something in their lives or waiting for a miracle. And I know, there are people right here in our church looking for a miracle right now. Some people in our church, man, they need a miracle this week. Are we going to fight for them? Are we going to lift them in prayer and be a voice of hope and encouragement? Will we leave a legacy? We look back at the apostles’ lives two thousand years later and say, “Man, where would we be if it wasn’t for the apostle Peter? Where would we be if it wasn’t for the apostle Paul.” What will

they say about us a thousand years from now? Will there be people saying, “boy, where would we be if it wasn’t for CACC?” Where would I be if it wasn’t for Raffi? Where would I be if it wasn’t for Ara? Where would I be if it wasn’t for Caroline?

The last time I preached, I gave you all a challenge. Don’t be like Jehoshaphat and strike the ground a couple of times, looking for that bare minimum you can do. God’s looking for a generation of people who aren’t afraid to go all out. People who are willing to look a little foolish if it means advancing the kingdom. He’s looking for a generation who will study his word and seek him. He’s looking for a generation that’s going to pray with fire. And that’s why I want to stop us here. First Sunday of the month, we always have a little prayer meeting after church. I know it’s an inconvenient time: there are snacks, we’re socializing, and we have things to go to after. I have to head down to my parents’ place after this. But stay and pray with us. For five minutes, if that’s all you can do.

We’ll do our thing where we stand over there for a bit, and we shake hands, and everyone says, “Oh, that was a great sermon,” and you pretend you weren’t sleeping through it, go grab some quick snacks for a few minutes, but then please come join us and pray. I’m serious; there are folks in our church who are in serious need of prayer. There are folks in Haiti, Armenia, and Syria who need prayer. This is life and death. And you may say, “Well, in Haiti, it’s life and death, here in San Francisco, here in the United States, it’s not as bad.” But the truth is, it’s life and death here too, if you’re willing to open your eyes to see it.

TURN YOUR TEST INTO A TESTIMONY

July 2023 Sermon Calvary Armenian Congregational Church

Well, it's been a while since I've been up here. The last couple of months have been pretty exciting since the wedding: much joy, great memories, and celebration. But it's also been challenging. Both Lara and I have been in a lot of pain. We're getting tired a lot, chemo has been knocking me down hard each time, and there have been many challenges. I think those stories go well with the lives of prophets like Elijah and Elisha. There were a lot of great moments but also many challenges—many setbacks.

Elisha has taken over for Elijah at this point. Elijah has been taken up to heaven in a pretty epic scene, and now it's Elisha's turn to step up to bat. And the situation has changed quite a bit. Ahab is out of the picture. He refuses to listen to the prophet Michaiah's warnings and gets killed in a battle against Aram. Jezebel is still around, but her influence is starting to weaken. Her sons are stepping up: first Ahaziah, then Joram when Ahaziah has his little fall that we remember from a few weeks ago, but by the time Joram comes around, he's starting to wise up and realize that he probably doesn't want to make the same mistakes as his dad and brother; he doesn't want to mess with this Elisha guy. He's not turning to God or anything, but he at least realizes that going on an active campaign to kill the prophets of God is probably not the best use of his resources. And especially after a major battle when he, Jehoshaphat, and the king of Edom need to be rescued by Elisha, he's going to leave Elisha be for now.

Elisha, meanwhile, is doing a lot of miraculous stuff. Up to this point, we've seen him part the Jordan River, purify the water around Jericho, summon some bears to attack a gang that was threatening him, rescue the kings and their armies when they go up against Moab in that battle, and even miraculously multiply some oil to help a widow pay off a debt. There are many parallels with Elijah's miracles, so it's pretty clear that he has that double portion of Elijah's spirit and has the added bonus that no one is actively trying to hunt him down and kill him. That's always a nice change of pace, isn't it?

We find another parallel with Elijah; an elderly couple in Shunem welcomes Elisha. The couple insists that he stays with them whenever he passes by. They even build a whole room on their roof for him. So, a little different than Elijah, who stays with a poor starving widow and her son during the drought, but still, we have a prophet of God staying with a particular family whenever he's in town. After enough visits, Elisha decides he needs to do something for this couple to repay them for their kindness. When he discovers they don't have a son, he decides that's the gift they will receive. So he calls the wife over and tells her that within the next year, she will have a son.

This is an elderly couple so you can imagine her reaction. It was probably a point of pain that they didn't have a son at this point. We're not given any information on whether they had any daughters, or maybe if they had sons at some point, but they all died, but either way, she has a very

human reaction here: Man of God, please don't get my hopes up. Not now, not with things the way they are.

Hope can be a very frightening thing, can't it? On the one hand, we need it to live; hope gives us strength from day to day. It's what gets us out of bed in the morning thinking, something good might happen today. But when our hope turns out to be false when we're let down, that can just kill us, can't it? We're hoping for that job promotion, which goes to someone else. Hoping we'll get into that university, then it doesn't happen. I'm hoping the Warriors will win their tournament, and then...ok, maybe that one isn't that important...or it shouldn't be. I've seen some people get too caught up in their sports...and...well, we won't go there today.

I'll tell you though, that some of the most brutal let downs I've had in the last year are when I've found out that I didn't qualify for one of the experimental treatments I was hoping to get. Boy those were tough. All this hope building up, and then, nothing. That's why it's essential that the core of our hope, the foundation, can't be on earthly things. Earthly things, they let you down. They're temporary. You focus your hope on them long enough, they keep letting you down enough, and you just stop hoping. Your heart is so hurt, you just give up. What's the point?

And that's why I think Elisha is doing something more here than just giving this couple a kid. He's showing them that there is a foundation of hope beyond what they've settled for. There's something greater at work in our lives. God is not some distant God who is only interested in the activities of kings and armies; he's a present God who takes an active role in our lives. The events in their lives may have left them disappointed, growing old without having a son to pass on their legacy to, but that's not what God wants us to focus on. He wants us to fix our eyes on him first, and he'll work out the details.

It's funny that over the last year and a half, one of the discussions Lara and I have been having quite often is on Psalm 37:4 - "Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart." It's a challenging verse for people going through the health issues we've been going through. Is it true does he give us the desires of our hearts? Is this just about eternal things like heaven, spiritual blessings, and such? Does it include earthly desires, the desire for healing, the desire for marriage, and for children? Because let's be honest, no matter how much we worship God or how close we are to God, we don't get everything we want in this life. Even the prophets like Elijah and Elisha didn't get everything they wanted. They had some letdowns.

But it's also true that as we mature in our faith, the desires of our hearts change. They start aligning bit by bit more with God's will, and God's plan. The point of that verse is not to get God's plan to conform to our desires but to get our desires to conform to the plans of God. And nothing does that like a season of testing. The testing of this couple, going through life without having the son they desired, led them to this moment, honoring God by providing for his prophet. And now, as their hearts align with God, he's giving them a new hope, a son.

Now, you would think that after everything this couple has been through, the end of the story would be happily ever after. We went through life with all this disappointment, we fixed our eyes on God, and now God has turned our testing into a testimony. Done, right? Yet look at 2 Kings 4:18-28:

18 When the child had grown, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. 19 And he said to his father, "Oh, my head, my head!" The father said to his servant, "Carry him to his mother." 20 And when he had lifted him and brought him to his mother, the child sat on her lap till noon, and then he died. 21 And she went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God and shut the door behind him and went out. 22 Then she called to her husband and said, "Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again." 23 And he said, "Why will you go to him today? It is neither new moon nor Sabbath." She said, "All is well." 24 Then she saddled the donkey, and she said to her servant, "Urge the animal on; do not slacken the pace for me unless I tell you." 25 So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, "Look, there is the Shunammite. 26 Run at once to meet her and say to her, 'Is all well with you? Is all well with your husband? Is all well with the child?'" And she answered, "All is well." 27 And when she came to the mountain to the man of God, she caught hold of his feet. And Gehazi came to push her away. But the man of God said, "Leave her alone, for she is in bitter distress, and the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me." 28 Then she said, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, 'Do not deceive me?'"

As tough as it is going through life without a son, to finally get that son, only to lose him right after, has to be an even greater disappointment than anything. Her response to this is such a human response: Why did you get my hopes up? I didn't ask for this; I didn't want this. This is why I didn't want to get my hopes up...because the pain of the loss would just be too great.

But notice also, when the tragedy comes, she knows exactly where to go. She goes straight to God. And we need to learn from that; when the tragedy comes, when the testing and the trials seem too great, God is the one we run to first. All the hardships she went through in life gave her the foundation to know who to run to in times of trouble. And of course, Elisha responds in verses 29-37:

He said to Gehazi, "Tie up your garment and take my staff in your hand and go. If you meet anyone, do not greet him, and if anyone greets you, do not reply. And lay my staff on the face of the child." 30 Then the mother of the child said, "As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So he arose and followed her. 31 Gehazi went on ahead

and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. Therefore he returned to meet him and told him, “The child has not awakened.”

32 When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. 33 So he went in and shut the door behind the two of them and prayed to the Lord. 34 Then he went up and lay on the child, putting his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands. And as he stretched himself upon him, the flesh of the child became warm. 35 Then he got up again and walked once back and forth in the house, and went up and stretched himself upon him. The child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. 36 Then he summoned Gehazi and said, “Call this Shunammite.” So he called her. And when she came to him, he said, “Pick up your son.” 37 She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground. Then she picked up her son and went out.

A little déjà vu here, right? It reminds us of the time Elijah raised the widow’s son back to life. Again, we see Elijah's power at work in Elisha, and God is glorified through this miracle. But we might also be left to wonder...why? Why bring this couple through such a rollercoaster? If you’re going to give them a son, provide them with a son. Why make them go so long without a son, to provide them with a son when they had given up hope, then take him away, then give him back? At least with Elijah and the widow, the miracle brought her to the faith to realize the God of Elijah is the one true God, but this couple here already seemed to have that foundational faith. They knew who the one true God was.

And we can often find ourselves in those situations, asking why? Why did I have to go through that trial? Why did I have to have that hardship? Why did I have to go through cancer twice, right? Asking why is a perfectly normal question to ask, and there’s nothing wrong with asking God why. This is something that Lara and I have talked about a lot, as we ask why we’re going through the difficult trials we’re going through. We’re not always given the answer, but there’s nothing wrong with asking the question.

However, in the story with this couple, we’re given a little insight into the why question because their journey isn’t over. Fast forward a little while. Elisha has been going on some adventures, healing a commander from Aram, getting their attention, and the army goes after him. Still, he beats their armies a couple of times, saves a city, does a few other miracles, and then in chapter eight, this couple is back on the scene. Look at verses 1 through 6:

Now Elisha had said to the woman whose son he had restored to life, “Go away with your family and stay for a while wherever you can, because the Lord has decreed a famine in the land that will last seven years.” 2 The woman proceeded to do as the man of God said. She and her family went away and stayed in the land of the Philistines seven years.

3 At the end of the seven years she came back from the land of the Philistines and went to appeal to the king for her house and land. 4 The king was talking to Gehazi, the servant of the man of God, and had said, "Tell me about all the great things Elisha has done." 5 Just as Gehazi was telling the king how Elisha had restored the dead to life, the woman whose son Elisha had brought back to life came to appeal to the king for her house and land.

Gehazi said, "This is the woman, my lord the king, and this is her son whom Elisha restored to life." 6 The king asked the woman about it, and she told him.

Then he assigned an official to her case and said to him, "Give back everything that belonged to her, including all the income from her land from the day she left the country until now."

Now, how's that for God's timing, huh? The husband has probably died at this point, so the wife was forced to flee the country during the time of famine. She returns, hoping to get her old land back, and happens to walk in right as the king listens to a story about her. And now her story and her miracles have set her up to get her home back and become a tool to show the king of Israel that God is at work. Keep in mind, the northern kingdom of Israel was usually the nation that was turning away from God to idol worship, so to have the king actually interested in the miracles of Elisha, rather than trying to find a chance to kill him, is a pretty significant change in direction. All of the testing this woman has been through has set her up for success and become a testimony to the king. Now the whole country has been affected by her life, and we see God's plan all coming together. Her faithfulness has been rewarded and has become a blessing to many.

One of the things Lara and I have discussed during our difficulties is that we don't always see the plan coming together. We don't always see the purpose of everything. Sometimes we do, and it's great, but other times we just have faith that God is doing something behind the scenes that we don't see. And it's stories like this that can encourage us that there is always a purpose behind what God is leading us through. One of my favorite verses is Romans 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

This verse doesn't mean that only good things happen to us; it means that God uses all the things we go through, both the good and the bad, for the ultimate good of His people. And our ultimate good, at the end of the day, isn't the things of this world; it's the eternal things, the stuff that we don't yet fully see. The Apostle Paul writes, in 1 Corinthians 13:12, "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." For now, we don't know the whole story or understand everything. But then, in heaven, we know entirely when the temporary things pass away.

Many of you have heard the leader of the team I go to Haiti with, Winston. He loves sayings played on words, and one of his favorites is that God is going to turn your test into a testimony. I think another one is He's going to turn your mess into a message. It's a fun play on words, but it's the truth. That's what Romans 8:28 speaks to. And we need to realize that our testimony is important. Telling others the things God has done in our lives and the difficulties He has brought us through. I think all too often, especially in Armenian circles, there's so much pride; we don't want to admit the times when we're not doing too great. When things were rough and we needed God. The stories about when God brought us through a difficult season and showed his power are important because they show others that God is actively working today. It strengthens and builds the faith of the church body. We may not share our testimony before kings, but you never know. Right?

Revelation 12:10-11:

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death."

The blood of the lamb and the word of their testimony. Our testimony is not just influencing the lives of people around us, but it's also a crucial part of us overcoming the enemy—the accuser. So, my challenge to everyone today is to know your testimony. Know what God has brought you through. Trust that God is working on a purpose you may not see yet, but you will at some time. And as God gives you the desires of your heart, as your heart aligns to God's will, give God glory because these light and momentary struggles are nothing compared to the glory to come.

A DYING BREATH

Originally published on Medium on November 5th, 2012

I don't know why this has been on my mind these past few weeks (maybe because of the recent Bible study series we just finished at church), but I've been thinking a lot about forgiveness. We usually think of forgiveness as something that needs to be earned: if I mess up, I need to beg for forgiveness and do everything I can to make up for whatever mistakes I've made if I ever want to be forgiven. Indeed, a truly repentant heart will do just that in response to errors. But on the other hand, forgiveness is something much greater than that.

I keep thinking back to Jesus' death in the book of Luke. Luke offers an interesting perspective that the other gospel accounts don't: a look into what the criminals being executed next to Jesus were saying. In all the other accounts, the only things mentioned about the criminals were that they were insulting Jesus and that they were thieves. Interestingly, theft unto itself wasn't a capital crime in Rome. So, whatever these men had been involved in probably involved some grave crimes. Possibly, they had even been associated with Barabbas and were expecting to be crucified along with him rather than with Jesus. I think a lot about that scene on the cross—particularly the insults of these two criminals. Honestly, this is kind of a weird time to be insulting someone. Crucifixion was a slow death by suffocation, not the type of time you'd be painfully wasting your breath insulting another dying man.

This isn't written anywhere in the Bible, but sometimes I like to think that the first reaction these two criminals had (when they saw Jesus there between them) was one of renewed hope. Jesus had been pretty well known as a miracle worker by this time, and there were plenty of rumors about him being the Messiah. Certainly, the Messiah wouldn't let himself be crucified, right? This would be his moment to come down, display his extraordinary miraculous powers, and destroy the nation of Rome once and for all, right? I like to imagine that the first thought going through each of their heads was, "Today is my lucky day! Here, I was expecting to be executed with Barabbas, but now I've got Jesus right next to me! Any moment now, he's going to call an army of angels, come down off of that cross, and save all of us from Rome! We're getting crucified on the perfect day!" Eagerly, they call out to him, "You're going to save us, right? This is your moment, right? Don't forget to take us down too! We're with you all the way!"

As seconds turn into minutes, and they hear the crowds around them calling on Jesus to demonstrate his miraculous powers, surely they were joining in too. "Come on, Jesus! You've healed every disease we've ever heard of! You've raised people back from the dead! Right...?" Renewed hope starts to slowly give way to fear, and they start to question him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself, and us too!" As the minutes drag on, and start turning into hours, that fear starts turning into frustration. "You're a fraud, aren't you? If you really were the Christ, you'd have

done something by now!” Silence is the only thing they hear now from the man they had been putting their hopes in for salvation from this torture.

It’s tough to say whether both criminals had been insulting him or if it was only one the whole time. It’s interesting to imagine that it had been both, however. As the hours drag on, one of the criminals, as he shouts out, has an epiphany as Jesus silently endures each insult. Here, between them, was a man who had done nothing wrong. There was no crime Jesus had committed; there was never any accurate charge against him. He spent his entire life of ministry healing people and giving them hope, and here he was being killed alongside two men so vile they had been sentenced to the most painful method of execution Rome had to offer. As the other criminal continues his frustrated venting from one side of Jesus, his conscience forces him to speak out from the other side. “Don’t you fear God...since you are under the same sentence?” With great pain, he gasps for breath to speak out another sentence to his mistaken accomplice, “We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.” Again, another gasp and breath, “But...this man has done nothing wrong...”

The following sentence he gasps out is perhaps the most offensive request in the entire Bible: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom...”

Here Jesus is, being insulted and humiliated by everyone on every side of him. His closest friends had all deserted him. He had been badly beaten and whipped and was hanging naked on a giant stick while soldiers were choosing how to divide up his clothes among each other. (I know whenever we draw pictures of the scene, we think of Jesus as wearing a loin cloth or something while he was hanging there. But remember that the soldiers had already divided up all his clothes, including his undergarment.) Here, amid all this pain and humiliation, a convicted criminal—someone who had absolutely nothing worthwhile to show from his entire life—makes a request with his dying breath:

“Jesus, I’ve been a horrible person. Everything I’m getting right now, I deserve. Everything you’re getting right now, you don’t deserve. Please...do you have any mercy left to give? By the end of the day, I’ll be dead, and I want to go to heaven with you. You’ve gone all over telling people their sins are forgiven...is there any forgiveness left for me?”

If I were Jesus hanging up there, my first thought would be, “Seriously? Now? This is when you ask for forgiveness. Not two years ago, when I passed by your town telling people that the Kingdom of Heaven was near? Not last year, when you saw me healing people around the time of the festival? Now that there’s absolutely nothing you can do to make up for what you’ve done—while everyone around me is insulting me and I can barely breathe—this is when you conveniently have a change of heart? What right do you have to ask for anything right now?”

I don't know how Jesus had enough breath to say anything. At the most, I can imagine myself giving a little grunt or something like that. But Jesus speaks—with his dying breath, and with only a few sentences left to give in his lungs—responding to a dying man's request, "Jesus...is there any forgiveness left for me...?" Jesus says: "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

Jesus had just finished asking God for forgiveness for each person in the crowd insulting him...and now he calls for forgiveness from someone who has no hope for the future. Everyone else in the crowd would have their chances in the future to atone for what they were doing. They would all be there in a little over a month when Peter would preach his first sermon at Pentecost. They'd get a chance to change their ways. They could at least do something to make up for their part in this tragedy. But this guy dying next to Jesus? This was it for him. With the hour and ten minutes he had left in his life, there was nothing he could do even to begin living out some kind of life deserving of forgiveness. He had no opportunity to show his remorse, no chance to right each of his wrongs. Certainly, his declaration of Jesus' innocence is no credit to him. Everyone involved in this scene - from the high priest to Pilate himself—knew Jesus was innocent. And of what worth is the testimony of a criminal sentenced to death, anyway?

The late Christopher Hitchens never stopped criticizing Christianity for what he considered a wickedly immoral teaching: the concept of vicarious atonement. Vicarious atonement is the idea that we can have forgiveness that we didn't earn...a forgiveness earned by someone else...because the punishment was taken by someone else. This is the cornerstone of Christianity. The idea that because Jesus suffered a punishment from God that he didn't deserve, we now are free from a punishment that we do deserve is usually offensive for two reasons:

One, we usually don't like to think of ourselves as deserving of punishment. When we set the moral bar for ourselves, we always put it so it's right where it's convenient for us to reach. Our default assumption when we think of God's justice is that what we do is good enough to escape punishment. Hey, I'm better than that guy, right? That guy's in trouble. But me? I'm set. Even when we're at fault, we prefer to think that we can correct the fault on our own with enough effort. After all, no one's perfect, right?

Two, we don't want forgiveness to come to others easily. When someone messes up, especially when they commit some wrong against us, we want them to know it. We want them to feel bad. "Do you have any idea what you did to me? You'd better do something about it! You'd better be really sorry!" Free forgiveness (so often) is annoying to us whenever it's applied to anyone other than ourselves or, at the very most, when it's applied to anyone other than our immediate friends and family. A criminal? My enemies? Forget it! They'd better be working day and night to pay off

what they did. They shouldn't expect forgiveness from God any time soon, at least not until I'm satisfied with what they've done to make up for it.

This isn't to say that it isn't important to punish crime, or that we should blindly allow people to hurt us again and again. Forgiveness, however, goes beyond that. God's mercy by very definition (a mercy we are called to emulate) goes beyond what is deserved. As Jesus was suffering on the cross, he was paying the price so that the dying criminal next to him could be forgiven. As the request is presented to Jesus, Jesus' response is, "Of course you're coming to heaven. I'm paying the price for you right now. And, there we go. Done. You're in." Some people think this cheapens God's grace: anything offered for free is too cheap to be worthwhile. But that's not true. God's grace isn't cheap and wasn't offered for free. In reality, it costs a lot—more than we can imagine. We just weren't the ones who paid for it.

Jesus didn't give any conditions along with his response to this dying man. The request was given, and the request was granted—no strings attached. No repayment is possible. This is the heart of Christianity: forgiveness is granted by request rather than bargain. In this truth, there is great freedom. There is a freedom from self-condemnation. There is a freedom from fear of judgment. Even a fear of failure fades as the reality of an unconditional promise for our eternal future takes root in our thinking and mindset. I've met people who believe they've never done anything very wrong. I've met people who believe their past is so bad it can never be forgiven. Both extremes are dangerous, and both are wrong. Ultimately, we need to understand that forgiveness is needed, and it is given. We need to be willing to ask. We need to be willing to accept it for what it is: grace.

Mercy was granted from a dying breath...to a request from a dying breath. While our lives may have many more years left in them than this dying man, our requests are coming from breaths dying just as much, spoken from bodies that have limited time left on earth—be they days, years, or decades left. And that mercy is granted to us from that same dying breath from the cross: "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

THE STORY OF EASTER

Originally published on Medium on April 20th, 2014

One of the most interesting stories in history is that of Jesus' death and resurrection. Few moments in history have anywhere near the fascination that this event holds, from both the religious and secular alike. Oddly, this event doesn't seem like a great historical turning point. There was no great change or shift in power or anything like that. For months after, life seemed to be going on as usual in that region. Then a small group of people following Jesus starts to grow. A few hundred here, a few thousand there...nothing really noticeable at first...and over time, begins to attract attention...until it becomes so prominent and influential in the area that it can't be ignored. As it spreads out, officials and historians notice this 'mischievous superstition' and start trying to undermine it. Despite that, this group, which started from a handful of uneducated people with no resources, grew into something that outlived every expectation of it.

Some event triggered this progression, and in every early Christian writing, we have pointed to this crucial event: the death and resurrection of Jesus. But do we have reliable accounts of what happened those few days? We have a lot of "scholars" these days who dismiss the central records we have from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—saying either they are just copying from stories they heard, or are copying from each other, or are just outright contradicting one another. A superficial look through the gospel accounts might agree with this since each writer includes some different details. And to someone who isn't interested in spending the time to piece together the different perspectives on the events that took place during those days, the accounts may seem at odds. I enjoy analyzing things, however. So, for fun, let's go through each of the gospel accounts and see if we can answer some of the common objections to the story of Easter.

First, let's answer the question: Who wrote these accounts? Many scholars today will claim that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were written well after the life of Jesus and his contemporaries and thus couldn't have been written by the people they are attributed to. Let's look at whether ancient scholars, who lived much closer to the times of Jesus, agree with that claim:

In his work *Against Heresies* (circa 180 A.D.), Irenaeus says, "Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their dialect while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome and laying the foundations of the church."

Origen (lived 185–254 A.D.) wrote in his commentary on Matthew that he accepted "the traditional view of the four gospels which alone are undeniably authentic in the church of God on earth. The first to be written was that of the one-time excise man who became an apostle of Jesus Christ—Matthew; it was published for believers of Jewish origin and was composed in Hebrew letters/language. Next came that of Mark, who followed Peter's instructions in writing it ... Next

came that of Luke, who wrote for Gentile converts ... Last of all came John's." (Cited in Ecclesiastical History 6.25).

Jerome (circa 392 A.D.), in chapter three of his *De Viris Illustribus*, says, "Matthew, also called Levi, apostle, and aforesaid publican, composed a gospel of Christ at first published in Judea in Hebrew for the sake of those of the circumcision who believed, but this was afterward translated into Greek though by what author is uncertain. The Hebrew itself has been preserved until the present day in the library at Caesarea which Pamphilus so diligently gathered, a city of Syria, who use it."

This point is often forgotten among discussions on the Bible today. But the fact of the matter is that we have the writings of the people who knew Jesus, the writings of the people who knew those people, and the writings of the people who knew them... and so on. It's interesting to notice that scholars today who claim that the gospels weren't actually written by the people identified by the early church never actually offer alternative authors but say we can't prove guys like Irenaeus, Origen, and Jerome were telling the truth. Therefore, we shouldn't believe them. In reality, we really have no reason to believe they were lying, either, particularly at a time when Christians were severely persecuted for their faith. I've never seen evidence of a debate in the early church regarding who wrote these gospels. There are plenty of discussions on other topics, but I haven't seen that. And with at least Jerome claiming that over 300 years later the original copy of Matthew still existed – and identifying the library it can be located at—it seems unlikely that there were any significant changes in the texts that escaped notice.

So if we have no real reason to question the authorship of these texts, the next question is whether the accounts contradict each other about his death. What happened that Passover?

The first question we have is on the Last Supper; the day (that we assume is Thursday) when Jesus ate with his disciples for the last time. People point to a contradiction between John, identifying Jesus being crucified on the first day of the Passover, and Matthew, Mark, and Luke, who seem to suggest that Jesus was crucified the day after.

John 13:1-2 "It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus."

According to John, Jesus was betrayed the night before the Passover Festival began, which would have been the night of the 13th of Nisan. We can confirm this by looking at the accounts of Jesus' crucifixion the next day:

John 18:28-29: “Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate came out to them and asked, “What charges are you bringing against this man?”

John 19:14: “It was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about noon.”

John 19:31: “Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was a special Sabbath. Because the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down.”

The other gospel accounts also confirm this: Matthew 27:62: “The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate.”

The day of Preparation described here seems to be for preparing the Passover sacrifice. However, the term is also used to describe Fridays generally (a day preparing for the Sabbath when you weren't allowed to do work). The “special Sabbath” mentioned by John was the 15th of Nisan, as specified in the Law:

Exodus 12:16: “On the first day hold a sacred assembly, and another one on the seventh day. Do no work at all on these days, except to prepare food for everyone to eat; that is all you may do.”

The first and last days were special Sabbaths, not ordinary ones. Had the Lord's Supper been the night between the 14th and the 15th of Nisan, the crucifixion would have been during the Sabbath of Passover, rather than before, which would have been a very inappropriate time. So inappropriate that the chief priests made a point of making sure they weren't trying to arrest him during the actual Passover festival:

Matthew 26:3-5: “Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they schemed to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. “But not during the festival,” they said, “or there may be a riot among the people.””

So when we read the gospel accounts that say that the Last Supper was the first day of the Feast, are they wrong?

Mark 14:12: “On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, ‘Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?’”

The word in Greek that we tend to translate as ‘first’ in these sentences is used in many other places in the New Testament to mean ‘before’ something. The word is *prótos*. So, it is quite possible that Matthew, Mark, and Luke aren’t claiming that the Last Supper was the same day as the day the lambs were being sacrificed, but rather the day before, per John’s much more detailed account. Thus, there is no contradiction in the scriptures; Jesus was crucified on the same day that the Passover lambs were sacrificed, fulfilling once and for all the sacrifice that covers our sins.

I should also point out here that the Passover was not a one day event; this was a huge event that stretched out over a week. People came early and stayed late, and since the Jewish calendar is a lunar calendar, the start time isn’t always precise (some Jewish communities actually celebrate the Passover on two days just to make sure they get it right, as discussed in this article by Rabbi Goldwasser). The fact that Matthew, Mark, and Luke mention the day of the Last Supper as the first day of the Passover festival is somewhat vague. It doesn’t give us reason to dismiss the very detailed and explicit account given by John and on top of that, Jewish days started at sundown, not sunrise, so that night for them would have been the first day of Passover, even though the Passover lamb wouldn’t be sacrificed until the next day.

Next question: What happened that night? Each account gives us some slightly different details, but none of the details contradict when you read through them.

Matthew starts the account of the dinner with Jesus telling his disciples that he will be betrayed and clearly identifies Judas as the one who will do it. When Judas asks “Surely not I, Rabbi?” Jesus answers “Yes, it is you.” Now, Matthew doesn’t indicate whether or not the other disciples understood what this betrayal would be or whether or not they even believed Jesus (we see later that at least Peter clearly doesn’t believe what Jesus is describing), but the conversation is there. Jesus then gives out the bread and wine, and they go to the Mount of Olives, with Peter promising that he won’t leave Jesus no matter what happens.

Mark’s account is similar; with the exception of omitting the conversation with Judas. Luke describes a similar scene, but with slightly different chronology. Luke describes the bread and the wine first, and then transitions to the topic of betrayal. He also includes an interesting dispute among the disciples which seems to be fairly common among them; namely, which one of them was the best. Jesus transitions from addressing that to the topic of Peter’s denial, and from there, the comment that Scripture must be fulfilled in Him, that He would be “numbered with the transgressors” in the future (Luke 22:37). Luke is unique in identifying the disciples’ reasonable response to this warning: picking up some swords to bring with them. We have no idea where these two swords came from, and it’s hard to really gauge what Jesus’ response to that was (He just replies, “That is enough,” and later rebukes Peter when he actually tries to use the sword to fight). But Luke at least fills in a gap that is left out of the other accounts.

Interestingly, John focuses on a much different side of the dinner. He starts off by describing how Jesus washes his disciples' feet during the meal (John 13:4), an event left out of all the other accounts. He leaves out any mention of the bread and wine, but instead transitions from the foot-washing to Judas' betrayal, and identifies this as the point when Judas leaves the dinner to arrange Jesus' arrest. Rather than going straight from this moment to the Mount of Olives, John instead goes into great detail on Jesus' final teachings to his disciples, which starts before they leave for the Mount of Olives and seems to continue along the way there.

Now, it's fairly clear that none of the events depicted here are in any way contradictory; each writer is just noting slightly different details in his account. I've heard some people claim, "Well in Matthew 26:34, Jesus says, 'This very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times,' and in Mark 14:30, he says, 'Today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times,'...and those two accounts contradict. Was it 'crows once' or 'crows twice' when Jesus said it?" That's going into way more detail than the gospel writers were intending to convey. They didn't have quotation marks in this time period, so all of these quotes we have now are just paraphrasing of the original conversations (paraphrasing and translating, I might add). The point is that Peter would deny Jesus before the next morning, and when the roosters started to crow the next day, Peter realized what he had done. How many times did the roosters crow the next day? How many times do roosters usually crow in the morning?

Matthew, Mark, and Luke describe the next scene, in Gethsemane, as Jesus going off a little way from his disciples and praying in agony. Luke adds a note that Jesus was so distressed that he actually started sweating blood (not an uncommon condition for inmates on death row coming up on their execution, and probably something Luke was familiar with as a doctor). And, in each account, the disciples can barely stay awake. Indeed, the quotes in each account aren't identical, but remember that ancient writers weren't interested in direct quotations but instead focused on the ideas conveyed.

Matthew and Luke both record a response as Judas comes with a crowd to arrest Jesus. In Matthew's account, Jesus responds, "Friend, do what you came for," as Judas comes to kiss him. In Luke, the response is, "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" Now chances are that Jesus said a lot more than just one line at this point—particularly with the commotion of Peter trying to start a fight and the disciples waking up and trying to figure out what exactly was happening. But we have at least some of the conversation captured.

John includes a little more on Jesus' prayers at this time. Rather than the details that the other accounts include, with Jesus praying, "Father if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my

will, but yours be done,” John instead shows us that Jesus was also praying for his disciples and others that would follow.

The disciples also seem to have a bit of an epiphany as they are coming to the Mount of Olives. After spending the whole evening confused with what Jesus is saying, they finally respond, “Now you are speaking clearly and without figures of speech. Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God.” From John's chronology, this seems to happen before Jesus' prayers of agony, and he then skips through those prayers to go straight to the crowd that comes to arrest him.

The betrayal moment is interesting. Judas needs to lead the soldiers and officials because they don't know where Jesus will be, or when he will be vulnerable without a crowd of followers to protect him. But once they get there, he goes up to kiss Jesus (again left out by John, but included by Matthew, Mark, and Luke). I've heard it proposed that the goal of the kiss wasn't to identify Jesus (the crowd he was with probably knew what Jesus looked like) but rather to distract Jesus while the soldiers moved to arrest him. Whatever the reason for it, all accounts clearly describe what happens next: Peter chops someone's ear off! It's funny, but this is the most clearly conserved detail among all these descriptions of this confrontation. The gospels don't all give details regarding Judas kissing Jesus; they don't all include details regarding the disciples running away; they don't all even give details about Jesus healing the guy Peter attacked. But for whatever reason, all four writers felt this was a very significant event to include: that the one time a disciple of Jesus tries to attack someone...Jesus stops him. I think this highlights something that was crucially important to everyone in the early church: we don't fight, we don't hurt, we don't kill. Jesus doesn't need us to defend him; he can care for himself.

So the disciples run away (Mark notes that someone who was caught tore out of the clothes he was wearing and ran away naked), and Jesus is led to the high priest for his 'trial.' John doesn't go into much detail about the trial. He records a little interaction between Jesus and Annas but leaves out all of the interaction with Caiaphas. Luke includes a little scene with some guards punching Jesus in the face as he's blindfolded, while Matthew and Mark give a few details about the false witnesses that are brought against Jesus. They can't get any reliable testimony against him, even with their fake witnesses. But eventually Jesus responds to their accusations against him by admitting that he is the Son of God.

Matthew notes: The high priest said to him, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” “Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied. “But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses?”

Mark writes: Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” “I am,” said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” The high priest tore his clothes. “Why do we need any more witnesses?” he asked.

Luke recounts: At daybreak the council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and the teachers of the law, met together, and Jesus was led before them. “If you are the Messiah,” they said, “tell us.” Jesus answered, “If I tell you, you will not believe me, and if I asked you, you would not answer. But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God.” They all asked, “Are you then the Son of God?” He replied, “You say that I am.” Then they said, “Why do we need any more testimony? We have heard it from his own lips.”

Again, each quote is slightly different, but remember that all this is a paraphrasing of their conversations. It gives fairly good credibility to the notion that these were independently written accounts, and not simply one person copying off of another.

Bringing Jesus before Pilate the next day is an interesting event. The Jewish leaders can’t go in to see Pilate since it would make them ceremonially unclean and unable to eat the Passover meal (I guess beating and killing Jesus doesn’t), so they need Pilate to come out to them. Matthew doesn’t include much interaction between Jesus and Pilate. Pilate asks him if he’s the king of the Jews, and Jesus confirms. Matthew includes an interesting note that Pilate’s wife sends word to him to leave Jesus alone and release him. Pilate gives the opportunity to the crowd gathered to release Jesus, but instead they have a criminal named Barabbas released (interestingly, a name meaning ‘Son of the Father’). When the crowd insists that Jesus be crucified, Pilate washes his hands to declare his innocence in this clearly wrongful conviction and sends Jesus to the Praetorium to be crucified.

Mark describes essentially the same scene, with the parts about Pilate’s wife and about his washing his hands left out. Luke includes an interesting detail that before Pilate releases Barabbas and sends Jesus to be crucified, he sends Jesus to Herod (the region Jesus was from was under Herod’s jurisdiction). Note that Luke doesn’t record Herod actually doing anything to Jesus other than having his soldiers mock him and dress him up in a purple robe. So, this might not be the same scene that the other accounts describe, but it seems to take place before Barabbas is released.

John goes into the most detail regarding the interactions between Pilate and Jesus. Interestingly, John describes Pilate as actually being fearful when the Jewish leaders informed him that Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God. Pilate seems genuinely concerned with the events taking place, but isn’t sure how to handle them.

Matthew, Mark, and John each give details regarding the torture before the crucifixion. Matthew describes Jesus being flogged, stripped, dressed in a scarlet robe, given a crown of thorns, mocked for a little while, and then hit in the head with a staff. After they were done, they took off the robe, put his clothes back on, and took him away to be crucified. Note that these aren't necessarily in any chronological order. They are just the events Matthew describes. Mark describes a virtually identical scene, again ending with Jesus being led out to be crucified.

John includes a slightly different detail: that Pilate gave the crowd one last chance to release Jesus after the flogging and humiliation. It isn't clear whether or not Barabbas had already been set free at this point, but Pilate makes one last effort to set Jesus free.

Now, some people try to point out that the accounts in Matthew and Mark seem to have a slightly different order than Luke and John. Luke and John record some interaction between Pilate and the crowd after Jesus is flogged and mocked (assuming Jesus' visit to Herod in Luke falls in this scene), while Matthew and Mark recount Jesus being led immediately out to be crucified. Part of the problem is that people forget that all of these events are happening continually and simultaneously for at least an hour or two; this was not a quick jump-in/jump-out situation. Pilate seems to be continually looking for excuses to stop the proceeding, and Matthew and Mark likely leave out the final attempt to set Jesus free. Each time, Pilate probably offered to keep Barabbas and release Jesus instead, and each time the crowd responded the same way. John at least seems to paint a very clear picture of Pilate going back and forth to the crowd, and that picture isn't incompatible with the other accounts. Luke includes a little extra detail about Pilate and Herod becoming friends after this event, possibly because it was a detail that had some significance to his readers at the time.

As Jesus is being led out to Golgotha carrying the beam they were going to crucify him on (pretty typical for a crucifixion), he collapses, and they get some random guy named Simon along the way to carry it the rest of the way—identified in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Mark adds a side note that Simon was the father of two guys named Alexander and Rufus, possibly because his readers might recognize the names. Luke adds an interesting note about women who were following along to mourn for him, and Jesus responds by warning them to consider what might happen in the future. They get to Golgotha, put Jesus on the cross, and divide up his clothes.

These events seemed to take place over a six hour period. Mark notes that “It was the third hour when they crucified him,” although we don't know what point of this process he was referring to (when he was sentenced, when he was flogged, or when they actually hung him up). He mentions the time (which would be 9am) as he's describing the scene of Jesus hanging on the cross, but he doesn't explicitly identify the moment they put Jesus on the cross as his reference point. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each indicate that there was “darkness over the whole land” from about noon to 3

pm (the 6th hour to the 9th hour). It isn't particularly clear what this darkness was; it could have been some supernatural event or just simply a very dark and cloudy afternoon (the words used don't necessarily mean a global blackout or anything of that magnitude). People don't seem to react significantly to this darkness in the accounts, so chances are it wasn't anything too extraordinary.

There is some objection to John's timing of things, as John identifies the 6th hour as the time when Pilate sat down in his judge's seat and sent Jesus to be crucified. It is important to keep in mind that people didn't have nice, precise stopwatches at this point in history; so it's entirely possible everyone is simply rounding their time references to the nearest quarter of the day, 3rd, 6th, and 9th hours (I imagine their sundials probably weren't the best). If Mark was using the point where Jesus had been sent to be flogged as his starting point of crucifixion, and an hour or hour-and-a-half later John notes that Jesus is finally sent to be crucified on Golgotha, then there isn't any discrepancy in their accounts. Some people have also proposed that John might be using Roman time rather than Jewish time, which might make sense if John was writing at a later time to a more Roman audience, and would put Pilate's pronouncement closer to 6 a.m.

At the end of the day, it really isn't a huge difference, and all these times are rounded anyway. The point is that this stretched out over the entire day, and wasn't some quick trial and execution. One of the most fascinating aspects of the gospel accounts is the detail each author records about Jesus' final words during that afternoon. Matthew and Mark only record the famous, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Luke includes an interesting exchange between Jesus and one of the criminals crucified next to him, as well as the line, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." John includes an interesting charge Jesus gives him personally to care for Jesus' mother, Mary, now that Jesus will no longer be with them. John also includes a comment from Jesus saying he is thirsty (which explains the scene shown in Matthew and Mark with someone giving Jesus some wine vinegar to drink) and another comment, "It is finished."

It's pretty likely that Jesus said a lot more than just that on this final afternoon, but it's hard to say. He had a tendency to be pretty quiet when people were insulting and challenging him, which was what was happening throughout the entire process. It's hard to say which of these exact lines was Jesus' final words, but if I had to take a guess it would either be Luke's line or John's, "It is finished." Matthew and Mark both mention one final cry as Jesus died, which would match Luke's final cry, but it is possible Jesus quietly mumbled some final words only heard by John after that shout. Whichever were the final words, we get a clear picture of both the suffering that Jesus endured as well as his commitment to the plan he came to earth for. He knew when he was done.

With the death of Jesus came several interesting events noted by the authors. Matthew, Mark, and Luke mention the temple curtain tearing from the top down (signaling the removal of an

impassable barrier separating man from God). Matthew also describes something like an earthquake, as well as “the bodies of many holy people who had died” being raised back to life and appearing to people. It’s hard to say exactly who these people were, but as Matthew was likely writing to Jewish readers, it was probably an event that people had heard rumors about in Jerusalem.

John includes a very interesting note about Jesus being pierced through his side to confirm that he was dead, rather than the typical process of having his legs broken to ensure quick suffocation. Since crucifixion was a process that took several days, and the Jewish people didn’t want people hanging during the Passover festival, the Roman guards wanted to make sure each of the people hanging was dead. Breaking their legs prevented them from breathing (as they had to push up with their legs to take in a breath). But they don’t bother breaking Jesus’ legs. John connects the fact that Jesus’ bones aren’t broken as he’s taken down from the cross to the rule that the bones of a Passover sacrifice weren’t allowed to be broken. It’s possible John was the only disciple of Jesus left with him in these final moments, giving him a unique perspective on Jesus’ death.

Lastly, we have the burial and resurrection. This part gets a little fun, because many people try to say that each of the four gospels contradicts one other regarding who goes to the tomb and who’s there to greet them. Matthew’s account describes Joseph of Arimathea burying Jesus in his own tomb, the Jewish leaders putting soldiers to guard it, and two Marys going to the tomb Sunday morning. At some point there was an earthquake, but Matthew doesn’t mention whether that was before or after the “Marys” got to the tomb, he merely states that the guards were terrified by an angel, who then spoke to the Marys. Both Marys left to go tell the disciples and eventually run into Jesus.

In Mark’s account, the actions of Joseph were identical (however the tomb is not specified as belonging to Joseph). But references to the Jewish leaders putting soldiers to guard the tomb are left out. Why would Matthew include this fact while Mark leaves it out? Because Matthew was writing to the Jewish people. Those would have been the people who knew about the tomb incident since the Jewish leaders had circulated the story that the disciples had stolen the body. Mark has no reason to include that information, since his target audience wouldn’t have any knowledge of that.

Mark includes the name of a third person with the two Marys: Salome. It’s important to note that Mark actually mentions these three at the crucifixion in Mark 15:40, and mentions that there were other women there that he didn’t name. Matthew makes the same mention in his crucifixion account. When the women reach the tomb, Mark describes the angel as a “young man dressed in a white robe” (Mark 16:5) without explicitly stating that he is an angel. To claim, however, that Mark was identifying this person as just an ordinary man sitting there in white, and not an actual

angel, is fairly absurd. Mark wasn't necessarily writing to a group of people who knew anything about angels (angels were more of a Jewish idea, after all, and Mark wasn't writing to Jews), and it wouldn't make sense to identify this person as an angel to a group of people who don't know what an angel is.

Luke's account also leaves out that the tomb belonged to Joseph, and references to soldiers placed to guard the tomb. Since these are both facts that are really only relevant to Jewish readers (Joseph was a leader within the Jewish community), it makes sense that only the gospel written with the Jewish people in mind would include those details. Mark and Luke leaving out those facts isn't a contradiction; the information simply isn't relevant to the people they're writing for. Luke doesn't mention the names of the women at the tomb, only the names of the women who go to the disciples to tell them (the two Marys, a woman named Joanna, "and the others with them"). Luke clarifies that the women actually went to the tomb in a group, and each of their accounts (Matthew's, Mark's, and Luke's) leaves out some of the names. This doesn't make the accounts contradict each other. Each of the accounts are explicitly stating that there were other people there that weren't named. It's simply a decision of omission.

Luke mentions two angels in his account (again, not identifying them as angels, but rather "two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning"). Interestingly, Matthew mentions the angel sitting on the stone blocking the tomb, while Mark specifies that the angel was sitting off to the side inside the tomb. So, were there two angels, one outside on the stone outside and one inside? It would fit each of these accounts quite neatly, and clearly in each account they deliver the same news: Jesus isn't there. John leaves out this early morning entirely, and picks up at a point where Luke leaves off in 24:12, where Peter is running to the tomb to see what, exactly, the women were talking about. John doesn't mention anything about any of the women other than Mary Magdalene, although he never states that she was alone. John adds that he actually went to the tomb with Peter, and that neither of them quite understood what was happening.

It's interesting that John and Matthew both note that the very first people Jesus appeared to were women. We hear almost nothing about them before this day and see nothing about them again in the Book of Acts. Yet, they were the first to witness what could be considered the most significant event in history. According to John's more detailed account on this, Mary (and likely other women, according to Matthew) stays at the tomb as Peter and John return home. As they wait there, confused and afraid, two angels and Jesus come onto the scene. After a brief exchange, the women return to the disciples with the news.

Again, there really isn't anything in these accounts that outright contradicts. Each author just includes different details that they felt were important. Interestingly, many voices that challenge the reliability of the gospels will complain that they are too similar and too different at the same

time. When one includes a detail that another leaves out, it's considered a contradiction, but when one describes the exact same detail, it's considered copying and somehow unreliable. Others will complain that these accounts just aren't enough, and that we need more to reliably know what happened.

It's interesting when you compare our records of Jesus to the records of other ancient teachers that modern day scholars have no challenge against. Consider someone like Socrates, who lived about 470 years before Jesus. Like Jesus, Socrates left no writings for us to identify him with. So, all information we have about him is from his contemporaries and students. Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, and Aristophanes are pretty much our only sources on Socrates, and they each paint drastically different pictures of him on many significant points (like whether or not he even accepted payment for teaching). Rather than throwing-out these accounts, historians put them together to create a picture of who Socrates was. Jesus seems to be the only figure in history that people pretend we can't know about, probably because his teachings to this day are considered uncomfortable and extreme. People continue to look for excuses to discount them. Easter is a chance for us to really ask the question, "Did this guy actually come back to life? Were his disciples nuts? Or did they actually know what they were talking about?"

Christianity, and particularly the belief that Jesus rose from the dead, has always been considered absurd—even in ancient times. For hundreds of years, Christians were considered foolish, dangerous, and worth persecuting. Yet throughout that time, Christianity continued to flourish, until it eventually overtook the entire region and nation of Rome. Today it spreads no differently, with a message no different than the first sermon Peter preached at Pentecost: "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact."

I DIDN'T SIGN UP FOR THIS

Holy And Gold Podcast Vol. 3, Ep. 32, 2023

Jeremiah 45: 1-5:

“The word that Jeremiah the prophet spoke to Baruch the son of Neriah, when he wrote these words in a book at the dictation of Jeremiah, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah: “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, to you, O Baruch: You said, ‘Woe is me! For the Lord has added sorrow to my pain. I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest.’ Thus, shall you say to him, Thus says the Lord: Behold, what I have built I am breaking down, and what I have planted I am plucking up—that is, the whole land. And do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not, for behold, I am bringing disaster upon all flesh, declares the Lord. But I will give you your life as a prize of war in all places to which you may go.”

We usually walk into situations or set out on paths with certain expectations. One goes to medical school expecting to be a doctor; another goes to law school expecting to be a lawyer or perhaps even a judge. When God causes our paths to deviate from our expectations, it can often leave us confused, frustrated, or even discouraged.

The Bible doesn't give us many details about Baruch. We're never told why he joined Jeremiah in the work or what his expectations were, but I like to imagine that Baruch recognized the power Jeremiah had and the importance of his calling. Thoughts of the great prophets of the past like Moses, Samuel, Elijah, or Isaiah were probably passing through his mind. There might have been an expectation to see great miracles and repentance, the nation of Judah turning from the sinful worship of idols and coming back to a proper worship of the one true God. Finally, after years of spiritual decay and foolish kings, Jeremiah's words and power would bring people back to the truth. And maybe, just like Elijah's power passed on to Elisha, Jeremiah's power might rub off on Baruch just a little.

I wonder what was going through his mind the day King Jehoiakim burned the scroll he had carefully scribed and faithfully read before the people of Jerusalem, a scroll that had been written in the hopes that it would bring people to repentance. All that work, all that hope, dashed in an instant. Was this really what Baruch had signed up for? To spend his life trying to save people, only to watch them die from their own foolishness?

Jeremiah 45 marks a fascinating transition in the book of Jeremiah. The previous section deals primarily with the events surrounding the conquest of Judah by Babylon: the end of Zedekiah's reign and the issues the Israelites faced afterward. After chapter 45, we see the various judgments God pronounces on the various nations: Egypt, Moab, and even Babylon. But first, God has a message to Baruch.

We're not told exactly why Baruch is feeling sorrow and despair at this moment, but maybe it was realizing that he wasn't going to see the great miracles and repentance he was hoping for. With King Jehoiakim firmly rejecting the words from God, it was clear the nation's course wouldn't change. They were headed for judgment and destruction. What was the point of even trying anymore? In this moment of discouragement, God reaches out and answers Baruch. His emotions, his frustration, his sorrow...they aren't being ignored. God hears him, and wants to respond.

I was fifteen years old when I received my first diagnosis of cancer. Up until that point, I had many expectations of what my life would look like. I was a 4.0 student in school, good at math and science, and was looking forward to the start of high school. I was getting ready for Thanksgiving with the expectation that I would be together with family. Thanksgiving day we got the news: stage 4 non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, spread all throughout my body. Pick a body part, and I had a tumor growing there. In a single day, my entire life turned upside-down.

For the next twelve months, I would be dealing with chemotherapy treatments every three weeks, with regular scans and blood tests, a weakened body and immune system, and the realization that I wouldn't be able to be the strong, top scoring student I was used to being. It took all my strength just to make it to school for a single, 45-minute class. I was angry, frustrated, and discouraged that my life wasn't going the way I had expected it to.

I was thirty-seven years old when I received my second diagnosis of stage 4 cancer. I had beaten the lymphoma after a year of chemotherapy as a child, but now I was faced with a rare, incurable intestinal cancer. Once again, my life is derailed, and I don't know what the future holds. For two years now, I've continued to go through chemotherapy treatments every two weeks, going through great pain and exhaustion. There are days when it's a challenge to just eat and drink, and as of now there's no known way to beat this cancer. I could be doing this the rest of my life.

In those moments, it's normal to cry out to God in the same words of Baruch: "Lord, you have added sorrow to my pain. I am weary with my groaning and I find no rest." What is particularly interesting about this passage is that God addresses Baruch's sorrow and emotions before going into the details of the judgment to come on the various nations. Out of everything there is to talk about, God's hurting child is the priority. God sees Baruch's suffering and seeks to encourage him, and that takes priority over the judgments to be declared on the various nations.

Part of God's response may not seem like much of an encouragement. God does acknowledge that things are going to be broken down and uprooted but also reminds Baruch that these are things that God Himself built and planted. This might remind us of interactions like the one God had with Jonah in Jonah 4:11, when God reminds Jonah that God has pity on all things He has created, and doesn't want to see them destroyed. Baruch may feel sorrow, but perhaps God feels it to even a greater degree, given that these are all things built and planted by Him.

God also has an interesting warning to Baruch: Don't seek great things for yourself because everything is coming to ruin. Perhaps Baruch thought that his working with Jeremiah would ultimately give him some level of prestige or admiration, and some of his despair may be coming from the realization that this won't be happening. God tells Baruch that he won't be seeing those great things but also gives him a promise: even though everything will be crashing down, God will protect Baruch and see him through to the end. As Christians, this can be an important reminder to each of us. As we live in a world that is coming to ruin, we often won't achieve the great things we were hoping to gain. Our plans fall apart, often due to circumstances far outside of our control. And as we cry out to God, saying that sorrow is being added to our pain, God reminds us that our lives will be protected as a prize of war, a prize that Jesus won with his victory over death on the cross. We are a precious prize that Jesus has sacrificed for, and while we don't have all the great treasures and fame that this world offers, we have something far more precious waiting for us in heaven.

Even as Baruch mourns, his work continues to impact people who came long after him. He stayed faithful to God's command; he never sought great things for himself, and today, we rarely hear about him. I don't think I've ever listened to a sermon preached about Baruch, and if you ask the average person about him, they'll probably say they've never heard of him. Yet, we only have Jeremiah's words today because of Baruch's work. He never became famous but was instrumental in ensuring that God's word was passed down to future generations. He never saw the full fruit of his labor, but we all benefit today because of it.

After so many years of battling cancer, I often find myself crying out to God in the same words of Baruch. Why do I have to go through this much suffering? Yet one of the encouraging things I get to experience during this suffering is finding out that my life has impacted people I haven't even met. People who have read or listened to a sermon or a message I've put together and found hope even as I suffer with pain and exhaustion. I'm reminded that I'm not here to seek great things for my life, but rather I'm a prize that's destined for heaven. We're allowed to mourn and cry out to God just like Baruch did, and just like Baruch, our lives will have an impact on others that we might not ever see this side of eternity. But most importantly, we're a prize that Jesus fought for and won, so let that knowledge sustain us as we go through the sorrow and the pain of life.

MATTHEW JOHN SILVERMAN'S FINAL WORDS TO HIS CHURCH YOUTH GROUP

In Hospice, Dying Of Cancer, April 2024

We were not meant to live on this Earth for eternity. In fact, eternity on this Earth would be pretty lousy, with war, disease, pain and sickness. We are looking forward to a new Kingdom, a better Kingdom. And for the Christian, that is what our hope should always be in because if our hope is in the things of this world, then we're going to get disappointed time and time again. Here, the moths and vermin destroy, and thieves break in and steal. Nothing on this earth is going to last but the promises we have in Heaven and Eternity can't be taken away and that's a promise that I like to emphasize in my sermons. Salvation is something that can't be taken away from us; there is no mistake you can make and no sin you can commit that's going to cause God to give up on those who put their trust in Him.

Paul encouraged Timothy that even if we're faithless, even during those times when we forget God and when we mess up, God remains faithful because he can't disown himself, and that is God's promise for all who have put their hope in His resurrection. He died on the cross for our sins so that we will have Eternal life. We have the promise that God will not leave or forsake us, and he has Heaven in store for us. So, don't let things like death scare you or make you think that God has abandoned you or forgotten you. For the Christian, death is our final reward; it's the moment when we cross the finish line and say we've done it.

We each have a different length of a race. Some of us are longer or shorter than others. My challenge to you is just to run your race well, however long it's going to be. You want to hear "Well done good and faithful servant" at the end. I did a video on the Parable of the Minas and Talents in one of the series, and everyone was given different things to be in charge of during their life.

But some didn't do anything at all; they just buried it in the ground and didn't use it. For those who used what they were given, however, even if they didn't accomplish much and only increased it by a little bit, God said, "Well done, come share in your Master's happiness." So don't look down on yourself if you feel like you haven't accomplished as much as someone else.

Watch out for jealousy and don't condemn yourself because you say the other person lived their life better than mine or accomplished way more, because you don't know what's next in your life. You don't know what future things God has in store for you and also because that's not how God sees it. God sees you serving in his Kingdom. And *that* is all that matters.

PLEASE CONTRIBUTE TO MATT'S FAVORITE CAUSES

We hope that you enjoyed this book and that it helped to strengthen your understanding and relationship with God. Matthew devoted much of his life to the people of Haiti and the Armenian Evangelical church. If you are interested in contributing to the causes that Matthew believed in, please click on this link or scan the QR Code.

[Matts Causes](#)

