



Sermon Series by Season

Rev. Mark Etter, author
Bethany Lutheran Church, Erlanger KY

Vol. 1 Part D
Fall

Ruth: Dealing with adversity
Joseph: When God uses bad to bring good
Reformation Sunday
Character in the last days

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The purpose of this volume.

Churches are often vacant for long periods or are in locations where it is difficult to find pastors to fill the pulpit when they are vacant. This series of four books is my humble attempt to help vacant congregations. The fifty-nine sermons, divided into four sections by the seasons, will give congregations an option on Sundays that it is hard to get a pastor. The sermons are arranged in series covering a specific section of scripture or topic. Some are meant to cover a season. Others will fill the long weeks between Pentecost and the beginning of Advent.

This is the fourth of four volumes of sermons that will cover the church year. The 59 sermons in the volumes can be used during the season indicated or as a sermon series at any time of the year. There is no cost to use these sermons and so I encourage you to freely use them with or without citation of authorship. God gave them as a gift to us at Bethany and we want to pass them on to you. Feel free to pass them on to others so that as many as possible may share in what the Lord has given all of us. You are also allowed to edit them to fit your specific location or your style of preaching. May the Lord bless you as you learn and grow from His word.

Table of contents

Ruth: Dealing with adversity.

- | | |
|--|--------------|
| 1. Plagued with problems Ruth 1 | p. 3 |
| 2 Overwhelmed by grace Ruth 2 | p. 6 |
| 3 Living in Faith Ruth 3 | p. 9 |
| 4 Rejoicing with hope Ruth 4 | p. 12 |

Joseph: When God uses bad to bring good

- | | |
|--|--------------|
| 1 Joseph: Overcoming the crisis Gen. 37:19-36 | p. 15 |
| 2 Joseph: Overcoming difficult times Ge. 39:1-20 | p. 18 |
| 3 Joseph: Overcoming being forgotten Gen. 40:1-23 | p. 21 |
| 4 Joseph: Overcoming worldly wisdom Gen. 41:14-40 | p. 24 |
| 5 Joseph: Overcoming Bitterness Gen. 45:1-18 | p. 27 |
| 6 Joseph: Overcoming Fear Gen. 50:15-21 | p. 30 |

Reformation: Guilt is gone when grace given Rom. 3:19-31 **p. 33**

Character in the last days

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|
| 1 Be righteous Matthew 5:1-12 | p. 36 |
| 2 Be prepared Luke 17:20-30 | p. 39 |
| 3 Be Faithful Luke 19:11-27 | p. 42 |
| 4 Be diligent Luke 12:42-48 | p. 45 |

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Ruth: Dealing with adversity.

The book of Ruth is the story of God's grace in difficult circumstances. Set during the time of the Judges, we see the contrast between those who trusted the Lord and those who abandoned the Lord and sought their own happiness in troubling times. Elimelech and Naomi leave the Promised Land because they don't trust the Lord to care for His people. After Elimelech and their sons die, Naomi is forced to return to her home having lost everything. While she is bitter, her daughter-in-law, Ruth, shows faith in the true God who uses her to achieve His purposes. God will provide for them and bless them by making them part of the ancestry of King David and Jesus. Read this book and be encouraged that your Lord is at work in the darkest times. He wants to use you and let you be a light to others.

1. Plagued with problems

Ruth 1

Big idea: the future depends on trusting God and asking for His mercy.

Ruth 1:1-22 ¹ In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. ² The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. ³ Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. ⁶ When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. ⁷ With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. ⁸ Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me." ⁹ May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them and they wept aloud ¹⁰ and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." ¹¹ But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands?" ¹² Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me--even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons-- ¹³ would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has gone out against me!" ¹⁴ At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-by, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵ "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." ¹⁸ When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. ¹⁹ So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?" ²⁰ "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. ²¹ I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me." ²² So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

Troubles come to all people 1a *In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land.*

We begin our story in the time of the judges. It was a time when the people of God forgot Him again and again, and God allowed foreign enemies to come and attack and destroy the people. The people would be under the domination of foreign armies who took all their food. The text leads us to believe that this is in the time of Gideon. The Midianites will swarm the land for seven years taking all the crops and many of the livestock. Many hid in caves or, like Gideon, hid the grain that they did harvest. Elimelech decided to run away and live with the enemy. It was a decision he would not live to regret.

Troubles come into all our lives. We cannot avoid them. We can try to manage our problems. We can try to run away from them like Elimelech, but that often means running from God as well. We can blame God for our problems as Naomi does, but that makes us bitter and destroys us from within. There is another alternative. Oddly, Ruth is the story of a foreigner who trusted God more than the Jews in the

text. She throws herself on the mercy of God and sets the stage for a glorious future. Her future and ours depends on trusting God and asking for His mercy.

Self-preservation causes problems to overwhelm us.

You can't run from problems v. 1b, *a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab.*

Too often, we think that we can solve or avoid our problems. Elimelech tried to run away from his problems. Like Abraham before him, he faced famine and ran from it instead of trusting God. He would leave the covenant and his people to protect himself. He would embrace the enemy to save himself. You will destroy yourself if you run away from problems, if that means also running away from God. God is your only hope. You need help to solve problems. Only God can deal with hardships caused by illness, job loss, or relationship problems. To leave God out of the solution is deadly.

Even worse for Elimelech, he honored the enemy of his people, not the Lord. At times, we figure that if you can't beat them, join them. We make excuses for our flawed character or actions by saying that everyone else is doing it. Yet, if we run from our Godly character as we run from our problems, we can only expect disaster. Why should we give up on the Lord's wisdom? What others are doing is not working for them. Why should it work for us? Don't run from problems; wait for the Lord and his solution.

You can't cover your sins up v. 8. *Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home.*

You can't just cover up problems, either. I used to think that Naomi was just being kind to her two daughters-in-law by sending them home as she returned to Judah. I wonder if she wasn't embarrassed and guilt-ridden by their presence. God had commanded Jews not to marry people from Moab. The sons were dead, but she was stuck with two Moabite daughter-in-laws, which proved that the family not only left Judah but had sinned in their absence. It would be better if they quietly returned to their homes and Naomi could pretend it never happened.

Sometimes, we have deliberately or accidentally had a part in creating our problems. We want to cover them up and pretend it never happened like Naomi. That would make things look good but would still allow those sins to destroy our lives and keep us from real solutions. It is better to confess our sins to the Lord and ask for his help. Only if the role we had in our problems is brought to the cross will they stop destroying our future. Then, the Lord will forgive and restore us so that we can overcome our weaknesses. But, unfortunately, we can't expect solutions when our sins still destroy the life we want to build.

You can't blame God for your problems v. 13 *It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me!"*

Sadly, instead of confessing her sin, Naomi was bitter about her circumstances and blamed God for her problems. She has returned to Bethlehem because the Lord, through Gideon, has defeated the Midianites, and peace has returned. People can raise and harvest their crops. Yet instead of praising God for His deliverance or admitting that they were wrong to leave Judah, she blames God for the death of her loved ones. She thought God should have made their sinful ways work out even though they walked away from God and his people.

Too often, people blame God for their problems. They may have ignored his wisdom and lived like the world around them, but He is supposed to make those sinful ways work. He is supposed to keep everything happy and comfortable no matter how much we mess up our lives. Even when we follow the Lord, he never promises that life will always be easy. Remarkable, faithful Christians who truly follow God get cancer and have heart attacks. The difference is that those people don't blame God but lean on God to help them through their problems. He is the helper in all our problems, not our scapegoat.

Faith in problems brings solutions.

You need to trust in God v.16 *Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.*

While the seemingly faithful Jews give up on God, the pagan woman Ruth stands up for the God she has come to know. Somehow in the ten years that this family has been in Moab, Ruth has come to faith in the true God. She is ready to believe and trust in God when others are ready to give up. That a cursed foreigner could have such faith is a testimony to the grace of God. Many would have excluded her from God's people, but God showed His love to her. Like the thief on the cross and many others who have reached out in faith to the Lord, Ruth believed and was embraced by her God.

God calls us to walk by faith in problem situations. He calls us to look at all the great things that we have seen him do in our lives and others and know with confidence that he will help and heal. No problem is too big for our God or His love. We can believe He is working in our lives even when we cannot see or hear what He is doing. We will wait for him because we know that our God will not abandon us. We will trust our God because we know that no one else can do what our God can and will do for us in our times of need.

You need to throw yourself on God's mercy v. May 17 *the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.*

When all is stacked against you, you throw yourself on the mercy of God. Ruth was taking a huge gamble going back to Bethlehem. Deuteronomy 23 forbids a Moabite from entering the congregation of the Lord. That means she should be excluded from worship and being part of God's people. She was counting on the mercy of God to somehow overcome her background. She had felt his love and was throwing her lot in with God, confident that God would not turn away from her. She saw that only God was the solution and would not let go of this God who had loved her.

There are times when troubles are so big that we have to throw ourselves on the mercy of God. Maybe the problem has come from our sin and we need his forgiveness and restoration to move on. On the other hand, the problem may be so big that there is nowhere else to turn. Either way, we get down on our knees and pray to God for his help. We throw ourselves on his mercy, trusting that he will forgive any sins and deliver us from troubles that seem too big for us to handle at times. In doing so, we throw our lot with the Lord, confident that he can help us in our need.

You can't control circumstances, only your response to them v.21 *Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.*

The first chapter of Ruth shows that while we can't control our situation, we can control how we respond to it. The people of Judah faced a famine that was out of their control. Yet, Elimelech and Naomi had the wrong response. Only Ruth had the right response. She controlled the situation by giving it all to the Lord in faith. Faith is about daring to believe that the Lord is working even when we cannot see what he is doing. It is believing in His help even when we can't feel change occurring. It is trusting that our God will help and that he does not enjoy seeing his people suffer.

We can try to control things by fleeing, covering them up, or blaming God, but as we see in the story, those things don't work. We don't have the power or wisdom to make things work by ourselves. A lot of problems are just too big for us. We will have victory only when we give the problems to God as Ruth does. She trusted God and threw herself on his mercy when she had far less reason to do so than the Jews of the covenant did. Her response of faith would pave the way for a miracle. The future depends on trusting God and asking for His mercy.

2 Overwhelmed by grace

Ruth 2

Big idea: God surprises us with His gifts. Are we ready to receive it?

Ruth 2:1-23 ¹ Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, from the clan of Elimelech, a man of standing, whose name was Boaz. ² And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor." Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." ³ So she went out and began to glean in the fields behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech. ⁴ Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, "The LORD be with you!" "The LORD bless you!" they called back. ⁵ Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, "Whose young woman is that?" ⁶ The foreman replied, "She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi." ⁷ She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' She went into the field and has worked steadily from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter." ⁸ So Boaz said to Ruth, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with my servant girls. ⁹ Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the girls. I have told the men not to touch you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled." ¹⁰ At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She exclaimed, "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me--a foreigner?" ¹¹ Boaz replied, "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband--how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. ¹² 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." ¹³ "May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord," she said. "You have given me comfort and have spoken kindly to your servant--though I do not have the standing of one of your servant girls." ¹⁴ At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar." When she sat down with the harvesters, he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over. ¹⁵ As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, "Even if she gathers among the sheaves, don't embarrass her. ¹⁶ Rather, pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her." ¹⁷ So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah. ¹⁸ She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough. ¹⁹ Her mother-in-law asked her, "Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!" Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. "The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz," she said. ²⁰ "The LORD bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead." She added, "That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers." ²¹ Then Ruth the Moabitess said, "He even said to me, 'Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all my grain.'" ²² Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with his girls, because in someone else's field you might be harmed." ²³ So Ruth stayed close to the servant girls of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

It takes a throw and a catch to make a complete pass

In football, it takes both the quarterback making the throw and the receiver catching the ball to make a pass. If the quarterback keeps it, the receiver runs aimlessly. If the receiver drops the ball, the pass is incomplete. In our text, we see a quarterback who is always willing to throw and a receiver ready to catch. For our God is the giver of grace. We cannot make him pass his grace from the cross onto us, but he is always willing. The problem is not his willingness to give; it is our willingness and readiness to receive the grace that the Lord provides.

At the beginning of the text, Naomi is bitter and almost immune to God's grace. She has come back angry at God and blaming him for her troubles. Ruth becomes the recipient of grace, for she is open to it and ready to receive all the grace that the Lord gives in this chapter. The simple truth is that God surrounds us with his gifts. They are ever present and are more than we can use. The problem for most Christians, including me, is that we are only sometimes ready for them. So we need to be open to the gifts the Lord has to give, or they will be as useless as a pass dropped in the end zone.

The throw: God gives His grace to men

God provides food for Ruth v.3. *So she went out and began to glean in the fields behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech.*

As a stranger, Ruth did not know who owned the various plots of land surrounding Bethlehem. She didn't fully understand the ancient rules for providing for the poor or who would honor them. She might just be chased off the land as a cursed foreigner. Yet, God was working to provide for His children. The tool for that provision was Boaz. In the text, God would use Boaz to provide a place where Ruth could glean a week's worth of food in a day. He would give her water and provide food for her lunch. Boaz even instructed the workers to ensure that there was plenty left in the fields for Ruth.

God continues to provide for his people. It may not be a free handout. Ruth, in this text, works long, hard days to gather the grain that she will thresh at night. Yet, God will provide ways for His people to have food to eat and a place to stay. He will give them opportunities to gather what they need. Our God sees the needs of His people and works to provide the things they need. He may do it directly, or he may use a servant like Boaz, whom God has provided with abundance so he can help others. Either way, God gives his grace in our lives. It is there whether we see it or not.

God protects Ruth in a new culture v.9 *I have told the men not to touch you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled."*

Ruth was especially vulnerable in this culture. She was a poor woman begging for a livelihood after being born in the enemy nation. She had no males to protect her. The only one who would have noticed that she was gone was the aged Naomi, and what could she do? God reached in and protected her. Boaz, again was the tool God used. He told her to glean only on his land and instructed the men to protect her and keep an eye on her. She should work in the company of his female servants following the reapers. God surrounded her with a group of people who would care.

God is eager to protect his people today. So many people around us are struggling to earn a livelihood. God wants to surround them with his people. He wants to do more than give them a single handout that will be food for a day. He has created the church as that company that can surround people with prayers, gifts, and the wisdom to know what to do in difficult times. When we are in trouble or when life grows hard, God tells us not to leave his field but to walk with his people. There is protection in numbers and with Him.

God encourages Ruth with a future v.12 *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 these verses, we even see the first hint that Ruth will have a future. The news has gone out of how she has stuck by Naomi. Everyone in the village knows of her character and loyalty to Naomi and God. While she may feel unworthy of kindness, the people see her character and are impressed. Boaz and others saw her need and would be the Lord's way of caring for her and Naomi in the future. Boaz speaks a blessing over Ruth in these verses and promises that the Lord will continue to care for her since she has sought protection under the wings of the Lord.

Those who take refuge in our God will find a similar blessing. Like Ruth, they have no guarantee that they will become rich. What they do have is a promise from God that those who continue to turn to him will have their "daily bread," just as the Lord's Prayer asks. Those who seek shelter under the wings of their Lord will find that he will continue to provide for and protect them. His mercy and grace are not for a day but forever. As they follow Him and trust Him, he will continue to help. God's power and provision know no bounds. They last for eternity.

The catch: Ruth opens herself up to grace

Hardworking: She will not just sit idly by v.2 *And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor."*

Yet, just as in football, the receiver has to catch the football of grace. Ruth could have just sat around waiting for Naomi to contact her family or for good fortune to come. But, instead of sitting, she took the initiative. She went out into the fields and worked. She went out as was allowed in Jewish law and picked up anything the harvesters and the women missed in the field. It was hard work, and often you only managed to pick up enough for you to eat for that day. Then you would go out and do it all over again and again to survive.

We often sit and wait for God to provide. Most of the time in scripture, it doesn't work that way. God usually wants us to step out in faith and do the work so that he can bless it. He wants us to take the first step trusting that He will bring the results. God's grace comes to Ruth and those who do not sit idly by. The provision was in the field. It was not in the shack where they were living. If we are to open ourselves for grace, we must be willing to use the skills and labor that the Lord has given us. He will bless our work in his name.

Appreciative: She realizes and honors the gift v.10 *At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She exclaimed, "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me--a foreigner?"*

The second thing that makes Ruth open to God's grace is her attitude. She never feels that God owes her or that the townspeople are obliged to care for her. Ruth is filled with humility and gratitude. She understands that the people and God do not owe her anything. She does not feel entitled. She bows herself to the ground showing her gratitude for all that Boaz and others have done and have promised to do. She recognizes that God has given her undeserved grace. Finally, she honors the Lord and Boaz for all they do and shows her appreciation through her words and actions in this text.

You can't earn grace. So when God offers his mercy in your life or when God provides for you, the appropriate response is thanks. We need to honor the Lord for all He is and continues to do in our lives. It is all a gift, and we can neither demand it nor be angry if God doesn't give us what we think we deserve. Instead, like Ruth, we open ourselves to even greater gifts from the Lord by honoring the Lord with our words and actions. We obey the God who provides for us and follow his will for our lives. We seek to live on his path for us, knowing it was chosen with love.

Content: She doesn't look elsewhere v.23 *So Ruth stayed close to the servant girls of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished.*

The barley harvest occurred during March and April, and the wheat harvest during June and July. That means for five months, Ruth labored in the fields of Boaz to gather enough food for Naomi and her to eat. The task was menial, tiring, and degrading, but she kept doing it faithfully. So often, I find myself getting tired when the work gets challenging or repetitive. I want to go off and look for greener pastures. I want an easier way of doing the task or getting a bigger reward. Sadly, I caused disaster because I left the field that God told me to harvest.

One of the great gifts that Ruth had was contentment. She understood that no matter how grueling it was in the fields, it was better than elsewhere. God had provided for her here, and she would have plenty of food if she stayed in his field and worked hard. The Bible says, "But godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Tim. 6:6). I know that I miss a lot of grace when I start looking for greener pastures. Therefore, it is vital that we stay in the places that the Lord calls us until he moves us if we want the grace that He brings to our lives.

Grace to you bring hope to others v.20 *"The Lord bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead."*

Because Ruth was ready to receive the grace of God, she not only was open to receiving God's grace for herself, but she brought that grace into the life of Naomi. The one who had cursed God now blesses Boaz and the Lord who have provided for their needs and has given them a future. God's grace is all around us, but many people can't see it and will not have it because they are too busy cursing God and dropping God's passes. Yet, when they see the grace God has given us, they can be turned around.

The grace that God gives us is meant to bring hope to others. So we need to tell them about the grace God gives. Share the gifts that God has given us just as Ruth shared the grain she had gleaned and the stories of God's love with her mother-in-law. The grace she shared moved Naomi from bitterness to blessedness. Where are you dropping the ball when God passes his grace to you? Are you hardworking, appreciative, and content? Is there some place for you, like there is for me, where we need to work on being more open to the grace of God? God's grace is all around us. Grab it. Hold it. Pass it on. Let others be moved from bitterness to blessedness by God's grace. Amen.

3 Living in Faith

Ruth 3

Big idea: Look to the redeemer to define your future

Ruth 3:1-18 ¹ One day Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for?" ² Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours? Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. ³ Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do." ⁵ "I will do whatever you say," Ruth answered. ⁶ So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do. ⁷ When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. ⁸ In the middle of the night something startled the man, and he turned and discovered a woman lying at his feet. ⁹ "Who are you?" he asked. "I am your servant Ruth," she said. "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer." ¹⁰ "The LORD bless you, my daughter," he replied. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. ¹¹ And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character. ¹² Although it is true that I am near of kin, there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I. ¹³ Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. But if he is not willing, as surely as the LORD lives I will do it. Lie here until morning." ¹⁴ So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognized; and he said, "Don't let it be known that a woman came to the threshing floor." ¹⁵ He also said, "Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out." When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and put it on her. Then he went back to town. ¹⁶ When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, "How did it go, my daughter?" Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her ¹⁷ and added, "He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, 'Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.'" ¹⁸ Then Naomi said, "Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today."

The redeemer is near v.2. *Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours? Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor.*

There were plenty of reasons to be afraid. Ruth had found Boaz to be kind, and she had a few weeks of food now stored away, but that was not enough to last for long. Moreover, she was a poor immigrant in a strange town with few possessions or security. She could have looked at all those things and been afraid. Instead, she chose to look to her redeemer and define her future with the Lord. In this text, we will see how she decided to define her future in terms of the redeemer. He had shown kindness and could lift her out of her desperate status to have a life with a future. Thus she looked to the redeemer, not the world.

I have heard so much negativity this past week. The news is filled with the fiscal cliff that will plunge America into recession. People talk about the rising taxes and curtailed services as if we are Greece and not America. Companies are dropping health care or raising rates in fear of what is to come. We could look at all that and live this coming year in fear, for this next year may not be easy. But we have a different option. We can look to our redeemer. We can live our life by faith and not by fear. We can look to our Lord, who can change the future for us even if the world is glum. So today, I will challenge you to look to the Lord. I want you to live by faith and not by fear.

A life with faith, not fear.

Wash yourself – put aside the past v.3 *Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor,*

As Ruth looked toward her redeemer, she needed to put aside the things of the past and look to the future with him. Washing herself was a way to show that she was preparing for a new life. Gone was the grime and dust, for a new and better life awaited. The new clothes meant taking off the clothes of a mourning widow and a woman with disappointments who worked in the fields and replacing them with the clothes of a woman who had a future and a life with the one who would redeem her.

We can dwell on all the disappointments of life, or we can look to our redeemer, Jesus Christ. Yet, like Ruth, we must prepare ourselves for him. We must wash away all the sins and habits that would keep us away from Jesus. Wash them in the blood of the cross so that we can be forgiven from them. Then let us dress in his new values and character. Let us prepare ourselves for a life with him even as we wash away the old life of fear. We can live with our eyes on Jesus and the redemption that he alone can give, or we can keep our eyes on the world and try to make that work for us.

Reach out to Him with confidence v. 7 *When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down.*

The plan was simple. Ruth knew where to find Boaz, for the village men were threshing the barley. They would separate the seed from the chaff and then stay there for the night to protect the grain from theft. She reached out because she was confident that he would not harm her or turn her away. She felt she knew his answer and must reach out to him with her desire. She needed to show that she believed in him and was ready to trust him with the rest of her life.

We know where the Lord will be. We can find him in worship, prayer, and in Bible study. We know that we can sit at his feet any time we choose and be confident that he will not turn us away. He has repeatedly shown us how much he loves us and wants to help us. It is up to us to reach out to him with confidence. He will not force us to worship or be in Bible study. Yet, if we want to live in faith and not fear, we must reach out with our answer to him of commitment. We must show that we believe in him and are ready to trust him with our lives.

Listen and obey His plan v.13 *Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. But if he is not willing, as surely as the Lord lives, I will do it. Lie here until morning.*

The kindness that she expected of Boaz was not disappointed. He had the plan to redeem her just as she had asked. Yet, it was not as easy as Naomi and Ruth had believed. There was another with a stronger claim to the land and hand of Ruth. Boaz must overcome the obstacle. He tells her what to do, and she must obey his words completely. She must trust him and commit herself to his solution. She must not go off and try to force the matter or take shortcuts because she grows impatient. To succeed means that she must do what he says exactly. She needs to obey.

The kindness and love of the Lord will not disappoint us either. God had a plan to redeem us in the cross of Jesus Christ. He has a plan for our future and to help us in whatever problems and difficulties we find ourselves in this world. Yet, as he lays out his plan for us, we must obey it completely. We can't bargain with God or try to make shortcuts that will make it easier. We have to follow the whole plan if we are to move from fear to faith. To do anything less is to destroy his plan and future for us.

Accept His gifts gladly v.15 *He also said, "Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out." When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and put it on her.*

Because it may take a little time to work out the plan and because he wants to show his joy at her faith in him, Boaz gives her a gift. He gives her enough food to feed her and Naomi for two weeks. His generosity and love show as he responds to her faith and her commitment to him. Ruth, for her part, generously accepts the gift. There is no sense of guilt in her. There is no sense that she doesn't need the

assistance. Instead, she simply accepts, knowing that she has been and will continue to depend on Boaz. She is willing to let him take care of her.

As we wait for the Lord's plan, we must believe that the Lord will take care of us. It may take a while for the right job to come along or for God's solution to our problems to appear. It may not be easy, but he will fill our lives with his blessings so that we will come through the troubles. We need to accept God's generosity, whether it comes through a miracle or the generosity of some other Christian. We need to depend on our Lord and know that our relationship with him will never be equal. We must put ourselves in his hands and let him care for us.

Wait patiently and trust in Him v.18 *Then Naomi said, "Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today."*

Now was just time to wait for Ruth and Naomi. They had food and shelter. They needed to trust that Boaz would do what he said he would. That meant leaving Boaz alone and not following him around as he made his connections. It meant that Ruth would not doubt Boaz or nag him if things didn't come as fast as one might expect. Boaz would do the necessary work, and Ruth would have to trust him. If she did anything else, she probably would get in the way and might even jeopardize the plan.

When God announces what he is going to do, we need to trust him. We need to live in faith and wait patiently for his solution and answer. We should not try to do part of His work for Him to help things along. We can pray and pour our hearts out to God, but such prayers should be ones of faith, not ones nagging God to get on with things and make things happen sooner. Faith will trust and have patience. Fear will interfere with God's work and make it more difficult for the solution to come.

Let faith in God define your future.

Since the barley harvest is in full swing, this chapter begins probably a month or two since the beginning of the book. Ruth had a choice. She could look at her past problems and present surroundings and live in fear and despair. Instead, she chose to look to her redeemer and have faith. She focused on the love of her God and the faith that she had in Him and in this man named Boaz, who had become God's tool for her redemption. She would define her future with God in mind and not with her past or problems. She would live in faith and not in fear.

I hope to share that message with people as so many talk to me with fear about the future. Yes, we do have problems in America, and yes, a lot of people are being impacted by them in their own lives. Yet to focus on the troubles all around us is to live in fear. It would be better to focus on our redeemer. God never promises riches, but he does provide for and protect his people. We find that the future looks different as we respond to our Lord's love and commit to him. He will care for his people in tough times. He will be their redeemer and protector. He will define our future with His love.

4 Rejoicing with hope

Ruth 4

Big idea: There is a redeemer who can change everything

Ruth 4:1-22 ¹ Meanwhile Boaz went up to the town gate and sat there. When the kinsman-redeemer he had mentioned came along, Boaz said, "Come over here, my friend, and sit down." So he went over and sat down. ² Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, "Sit here," and they did so. ³ Then he said to the kinsman-redeemer, "Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our brother Elimelech. ⁴ I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, do so. But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line." "I will redeem it," he said. ⁵ Then Boaz said, "On the day you buy the land from Naomi and from Ruth the Moabitess, you acquire the dead man's widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property." ⁶ At this, the kinsman-redeemer said, "Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it." ⁷ (Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalizing transactions in Israel.) ⁸ So the kinsman-redeemer said to Boaz, "Buy it yourself." And he removed his sandal. ⁹ Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, "Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Kilion and Mahlon. ¹⁰ I have also acquired Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from the town records. Today you are witnesses!" ¹¹ Then the elders and all those at the gate said, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. ¹² Through the offspring the LORD gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah." ¹³ So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Then he went to her, and the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. ¹⁴ The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! ¹⁵ He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth." ¹⁶ Then Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him. ¹⁷ The women living there said, "Naomi has a son." And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. ¹⁸ This, then, is the family line of Perez: Perez was the father of Hezron, ¹⁹ Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, ²⁰ Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, ²¹ Salmon the father of Boaz, Boaz the father of Obed, ²² Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David.

Things look dark until the redeemer comes.

The book of Ruth opens with three funerals but will close with a wedding and the birth of a child. We see the hand of the Lord in this all as he takes the darkness and brings light through the gift of a redeemer. He takes a woman from the cursed nation of Moab and brings her into His family. Things did look dark when Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem, but now the future is bright, and the high point of Israel's history is just on the horizon. What is remarkable is that the family of Boaz and Ruth is at the heart of the golden age of God's people.

There is a lot of doom and gloom right now in America. This golden land we live in has felt tarnished with an uncertain economy and people without jobs. We act like the future is gloomy, but there is a redeemer who can and does change everything. Our redeemer is also of the house of Boaz and Ruth. He is Jesus, their descendant, and our Lord. God is not done with His people in our day any more than He was in the days of the judges. We, too, have a redeemer who can change everything and whom we must trust. As we look at this text, let us remember what a redeemer can do when times look dark.

All it takes is a redeemer.

A redeemer who won't give up v. 1 *Now Boaz had gone up to the gate and sat down there. And behold, the redeemer, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by. So Boaz said, "Turn aside, friend; sit down here."*

We saw Boaz and Ruth on the threshing floor as we ended the last chapter of Ruth. There Boaz made a promise to Ruth that he would redeem her. In the lesson today, we see him busy going about that task. He is a man on a mission, and nothing will keep him from keeping that promise. Of course, only the right man could take up the challenge. You had to be a close relative to Elimelech. You had to follow the path as the law ordained. The nearest relative had to be contacted, and the city's elders had to witness the process. Not everyone could be the redeemer.

Our God made a promise long ago in the Garden of Eden that he would save His people from their sins. Throughout the Bible, we see Him busy keeping that promise as He prepares for the redeemer. We see history changed so that a baby could be born in the city of Bethlehem. And that redeemer could not just be anyone. It had to be the perfect son of God born to a human mother. It had to be one of us, so the Son of God was born as a man so that he could live with us and die for us. No angel could save humanity, and no other human could. Only Jesus, our kinsman redeemer and Lord could redeem us from sin.

A redeemer who wipes away our mistakes v.3 *Then he said to the redeemer, "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our relative Elimelech."*

Elimelech had left his land and country when he went to Moab. During the years he had been gone, someone else had farmed it and made it their own. Yet, there were laws that protected the land so that it stayed with the family and could not be permanently sold outside the tribe or clan. The land could be redeemed at a price. What Elimelech had done would have to be undone as Boaz repurchased it and brought it back into the family. The sins of Elimelech would have to be paid for by Boaz so that the family of Naomi and Ruth could have a future.

When Adam and Eve sinned against God in the Garden of Eden, it was clear that someone would have to pay the price for their sin. Jesus would have to be the redeemer and buy back what had once been God's. He would have to pay the so that mankind could have their sins wiped away and be his people again. This action is the heart of redemption. It is the payment for what had been lost. It is a payment to redeem something or someone lost by sin. It is necessary so that all of humanity might have a future and a home with their God again.

A redeemer who loves us deeply v.10 *Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife,*

Why would Boaz do such a thing? The obvious answer has to include love and respect. Yes, he was an honorable man who knew the law of the Lord and was ready to fulfill his part. Yes, he knew it was important that the land stays in the family. But he also seems to have loved this woman Ruth. He admired her for all that she was doing for Naomi. He admired her character and her values. Here was a woman who was not afraid to do the hard things to support herself. Here was a woman who believed in and clung to the one true God.

Our redeemer saw none of those qualities in us. As sinful human beings, we were not people who were to be admired. We were not a people of character and values. The people of Israel and the people of the church have rebelled against God time and time again. That is what makes our redeemer so unique. He still loves us. He was willing to redeem us and make us His simply because of his great love for us. He wanted us to be his people again. He wanted us to love him again as Adam and Eve did in the garden. He loved us, and so He redeemed us gladly.

A redeemer willing to pay the price v.6 *Then the redeemer said, "I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it."*

The near redeemer was not willing to pay the price of redemption. He was glad to pick up the piece of land so that he could have it for his children and grandchildren. Yet, when he was expected to buy back that piece of land for Ruth and her children, the cost got to be too much. Only Boaz seemed willing to buy the land even if he had to mortgage the property he already had to buy this one and save the future for Ruth and Naomi. Yes, he was willing to pay the price even if it impacted his inheritance for any children he might already have.

The price was high for Boaz. But, the price for our redeemer was higher. The price for our redemption was the life of our savior Jesus Christ. He had to become human like us so that he could be our redeemer, and then he had to die on the cross to set us free. He was not afraid to leave His home in heaven to come and redeem us. He was unafraid of becoming a human being and leaving his divine powers behind. He was not afraid to face a cross and all the pain it would entail. He was willing to pay the price so that we might have a future with Him.

Blessings follow a redeemer.

He changes our lives with hope v.14 *Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel!"*

When the redeemer comes into your life, amazing things happen. Look at the change in Ruth in this book. She has gone from loneliness to love and from despair to hope. She was an outsider who lived in poverty and is now at the center of her community and history. Naomi, likewise, has changed. She is not a bitter woman but a woman blessed by the Lord and filled with joy. She will not die in obscurity, but her life is recorded as an example of what a redeemer can do in people's lives.

The change in people's lives when the Lord Jesus redeems them is just as impressive. Those who were slaves of sin now become servants of heaven. Those who are lonely and in despair have a friend who brings joy into their lives. That is why it is so vital that we bring this redeemer into the lives of others. There is no reason for them to have to suffer, feeling like all is lost. There is a redeemer who paid the price for them and can change their lives with his love and mercy.

He changes the future v.17 *"A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.*

The book ends with an astonishing conclusion. The redeemer has changed everything for Bethlehem and all of Israel. This small town will become well known in just a few generations. It will be the birthplace of the greatest king that Israel would ever have. King David would defeat the nations that caused Israel to suffer so much during the judges' time. Then, he would bring all the lands under the control of the Jews and make their name great. That miracle would happen because Boaz, the redeemer, lived out his faith and changed history.

Yet the greatest surprise is that the Messiah himself would call this little village of Bethlehem his birthplace. Jesus would be descended from Ruth and Boaz and bring blessing to the town, the Jews, and all who have lived. He has the power to deal with terrible economies, broken relationships, and anything else that brings us grief. The story of Ruth can be our story. All it takes is a redeemer. So when problems seem too big for you, do not despair. Look to the descendant of Ruth, Jesus Christ. He is a redeemer that can change everything. Amen

Joseph: When God uses bad to bring good

As a youngster, Joseph was overconfident and arrogant. Being his father's favorite, his brothers hated him and conspired to get rid of him. Yet, God was not finished with Joseph but sought to mold him into a man who would be a blessing instead of a curse for his family. Hardships came into his life, and he learned to trust the Lord and to accept that the Lord could use bad to bring good things for him and his family. Throughout this story, you can see how the Lord guided Joseph's path and transformed each setback into a step forward. The arrogant young man became a humble and powerful ruler whom God used to protect and multiply His people into a nation. Learn from Joseph how to overcome difficulties through the power of God.

1 Joseph: Overcoming the crisis

Gen. 37:19-36

Big idea: Helplessness teaches us to trust in God, not ourselves.

Genesis 37:19-36 ¹⁹ "Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. ²⁰ "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams." ²¹ When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. "Let's not take his life," he said. ²² "Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don't lay a hand on him." Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father. ²³ So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe--the richly ornamented robe he was wearing--²⁴ and they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it. ²⁵ As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt. ²⁶ Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood?" ²⁷ Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed. ²⁸ So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt. ²⁹ When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. ³⁰ He went back to his brothers and said, "The boy isn't there! Where can I turn now?" ³¹ Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. ³² They took the ornamented robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe." ³³ He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces." ³⁴ Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. ³⁵ All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son." So his father wept for him. ³⁶ Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

Making sense of the crisis

In the secular world, people attribute the good and bad of life to chance or fate. When a crisis comes, we have trouble making sense of devastating experiences. Many have read the story of Joseph and focused on his arrogance or his father's favoritism as the cause of the disaster. That may be true, but it doesn't help us to overcome troubles. We have to look to the Lord for help. It will only be His grace that can turn our problems into blessings. It will only be God walking along with us that helps us to overcome disaster and hurts.

The crisis has come on our nation with the virus and our handling of it. But, while we can point to other disasters for America, like the civil war or the great depression, that doesn't help us to overcome the troubles and the depression and dark feelings that we might have from them. In this series, we want to see how we overcome the darkness that comes in every life by looking toward the Lord and not at ourselves.

We need to look at what the Lord can do in our troubles rather than at the concerns themselves so that we learn to trust Him in dark times and let Him bring joy.

When the world turns against you

A. Anger at past arrogance v. 20 *"Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams."*

One could say that Joseph and his father, Jacob, were only reaping what they had sown. First, Jacob had set one son above all the others. He had given him a special robe that set Joseph apart. Then Joseph had communicated his dreams of grandeur. One day he would be greater than all his brothers. Is it any wonder that hate filled their hearts when they saw him in the distance? They might not know their brother at a distance, but they couldn't miss the coat. All of Joseph's arrogance and the neglect the brothers had felt at their father's hand boiled upon them, and they plotted against their brother.

Our world is filled with such hatred, and both the guilty and innocent are feeling the anger. Some races have a legitimate beef that they have been passed over in life. It is harder for minorities to overcome poor education. It is hard for minorities who come from broken families to get ahead. Other groups feel slighted as well, and media and group mentality fuel anger against others in the nation, so they want to lash out without thinking. Those who are guilty and those who are innocent are caught up in their anger. They often act without thinking about what they are doing.

B. Betrayal when you least expect it v. 23 *So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe--the richly ornamented robe he was wearing—*

He came to check up on them and ended up in a cistern. The brother's anger exploded, and they stripped their brother of the accursed coat and threw him in a cistern where he would slowly die without food or water. If Rueben had not pleaded with them, they would have thrown his dead body in the cistern. Sudden betrayal had come upon Joseph, and the brothers did what he would never have expected. In Genesis 42, the brothers chat about how Joseph pleaded for his life as he suffered and begged for mercy. Joseph knew how grim his fate was and that it could be all over.

Often crisis comes without warning. The doctor's office tells you a test has revealed something drastic. The furnace stops working in the middle of winter, or a car crashes into you on a busy highway. Life betrays you when you least expect it. At that moment, your life has changed. You wonder how you will go on. You wonder if you will survive the illness or the car crash that came so suddenly. The world would tell you to accept your fate. But, the Christian knows that there is someone who can help, which gives hope.

The cost of betrayal

C. A humbled young man v. 28 *So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.*

He probably felt a glimmer of hope when his brothers pulled him up out of the cistern. But, then, they handed him over for a mere twenty shekels of silver. He had traded certain death for a life of slavery. The price given for Joseph was that of a common slave according to the laws of Hammurabi. He had boasted that he would be above them, but now he wasn't even one of them. How humiliating as his heart sank. He probably felt shocked, hurt, and fearful of what the future would bring. His world had come crashing in on him, and slavery was a new low for him. The favored son was now a common slave.

In a crisis, there is often that moment of hope that things will be all right. Then things go wrong, and our hopes are dashed away. It is the smile of the doctor or the paramedic who pulls us from our crashed car. We think things will be OK until they aren't. Life has turned against us, and we are afraid. At that moment, like Joseph, we feel shocked and fearful. Yet, if we want hope, we must look toward the Lord

and find our confidence in Him. Life has become a struggle, but we know that God can help. So in the darkness of life, we throw ourselves on his mercy and pray that God will help.

D. A Father in grief v. 35 *All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son." So his father wept for him.*

Having sold their brother to a place where he will never come back from, the brothers have to find a way to make him disappear from the family. Just as Jacob deceived his father, Isaac, the brothers will deceive Jacob. The robe is dipped in blood, and they let their father make his conclusion. What they never thought about was that they could not take away the father's great love for his son. The father's grief was intense, and he would not be consoled. He showed that their lives meant nothing if Joseph was gone. The sons betray their father and would feel that pain throughout the rest of the story.

Our problems often affect others. If any of us died in a car crash, there would be people who would be impacted for the rest of their lives. Crisis doesn't just affect us. It affects those around us. They feel our pain when we are hurting. They mourn our loss when we are gone. Yet, Christians do not grieve like other men and women. They have hope that the Lord will overcome the crisis in their lives. They have the confidence of the resurrection when those we love die in faith. We feel problems not only when they come into our lives but when it happens in the lives of those we love.

God used their evil act to bring good Genesis 50:20 *You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*

To understand what is happening beneath the surface, we have to look at the words of Joseph at the end of the story. His brothers meant it for evil, but God used it for good. When we look at the whole narrative, we see the hand of God saving Joseph from death and sending him to Egypt so he can rescue his family later. The arrogant boy of 17 would become his family's faithful and mature leader before he was forty years old. If the family had stayed in Palestine, they would have all died or been assimilated into the Canaanite people. Coming to Egypt, they would prosper and be a great nation.

God is still at work in His people. He helps them grow through the crisis if they are willing to listen to Him and follow Him. He brings good in a world that is filled with evil. It may take months or years for good to come about but know that the Lord is working in the lives of his people. If you want to overcome a crisis in your life, you don't rely on fate. You rely on God. You seek him as Joseph must have on the journey to Egypt and later when he was in prison. God's actions don't justify the evil that the brothers did. But, it does use it for good, just as God will do in our lives.

The power of helplessness

Why would the Lord allow all these bad things to happen to Joseph? An author named Catherine Marshall describes it as the power of helplessness. When a person is helpless to take care of themselves, they look to the Lord and put their hope in Him. They open the doors for miracles and stop trying to save themselves. I picture Joseph walking to Egypt angry with God for what had happened and later crying for mercy. It is what broke an arrogant boy and allowed God to mold him into the savior of his family. He knew what God had done for his father, Jacob, and great-grandfather, Abraham. So now he asked for help for himself.

Those who are in crisis and who believe that God has the power and love to help will find they open the doors of life for miracles. Likewise, God will aid the helpless who turn to him. We see God saving Joseph's life and walking with him through the plan for his life with miracle after miracle. Overcoming the crisis is a matter of faith. It is not doing something miraculous. It is believing that God can and will do miracles for you. Faith in God helps you to grow and gives you patience in the dark times so that God can work wonders in your life and fulfill His great plan for you.

2 Joseph: Overcoming difficult times

Ge. 39:1-20

Big idea: Faithfulness to God's ways brings you through tough times.

Genesis 39:1-20 ¹ Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there. ² The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. ³ When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, ⁴ Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. ⁵ From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. ⁶ So he left in Joseph's care everything he had; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate. Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, ⁷ and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!" ⁸ But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. ⁹ No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" ¹⁰ And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her. ¹¹ One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. ¹² She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house. ¹³ When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, ¹⁴ she called her household servants. "Look," she said to them, "this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. ¹⁵ When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house." ¹⁶ She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. ¹⁷ Then she told him this story: "That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. ¹⁸ But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house." ¹⁹ When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, "This is how your slave treated me," he burned with anger. ²⁰ Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined. But while Joseph was there in the prison,

How to react when life goes sour

The outcome of your life will depend on how you react when life goes sour. That is true today in these difficult times. As we look at people around us, they respond to life's problems in three ways. Each takes them down a different path. Many are reacting with anger. They protest in the streets. They riot and destroy the property of others to show their disdain. Unfortunately, past riots like the Chinese riot in Tiananmen Square in 1989 or the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 were put down by force and accomplished less than we would expect.

Others react to sour times with depression. They fold in on themselves and withdraw. I fear that many will stop looking for work and that kids in college will be discouraged by the current problems. Take away their dreams, and people give up. They follow the path of least resistance. Yet, Joseph shows us another way. He remains faithful as he gets knocked down time after time. He knows God's standards of right and wrong and follows them. He gives his total effort in tough times. His actions allow God to bless him and change the course of his future. He overcomes this situation by being faithful.

Overcoming when life goes against you

A. Remaining faithful when you are in a challenging situation v. 3 *When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did,*

He could have been bitter and demanded more, but he began to work and do his best in a bad situation. So whatever you have to say about Jacob, he raised his son so that he was willing to work hard and to be honest and filled with other good quality characteristics. Joseph didn't sit and pout or get angry about the situation. He lived as God's man doing his best, and God blessed him. Joseph had success in this pagan world where everyone worshipped the sun and the Nile. He must have trusted the Lord and believed that God would prosper him as God had blessed Jacob.

Difficult situations demand faithful people. They keep following the Lord's values of right and wrong. They keep working hard and doing their best even in a bad situation. God blesses them by giving them a sense of right and wrong in a world with no standards. God gives them the character to get them through. God blesses them behind the scenes because they don't get in the way of his blessings. God let Joseph succeed in this strange world, and He will do so for us. He will provide opportunities and keep us out of danger. As we stay close to Him and follow Him, we will find that God is near and helps us.

B. Resist temptations that come your way v. 8 *But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care.*

Sadly, temptations often come when things are going well. Satan does not like it when God's people succeed. In the text, Joseph has been raised by Potiphar to be the highest servant in the household. He manages both the inside workers and those out in the fields. Everything has been entrusted to Joseph. His success and good looks draw the glance of the boss' wife. Joseph has to resist her again and again. He witnessed his older brother Rueben seduce one of his father's concubines. Joseph knows the result of that sin and doesn't want to get trapped and fall from grace as his brother did. So he resists, and it costs him.

Temptations come to us in a variety of ways. It might be greed, lust, or anger. It can build over time, or it can come suddenly. Satan will often try to get us to rationalize our sins. The result is always hurt to ourselves and others. Satan wants to destroy us and will use whatever means he can. Faithfulness requires that we follow God's commands. God knows what is good and what is harmful to us and others. Joseph realizes that to sin this way is a sin against a gracious God who has helped him. Therefore, we must resist the temptations that come our way and repent of the temptations that cause us to sin.

C. Rebound when life is unfair v. 21 *the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden.*

Potiphar knew Joseph's character and probably knew his wife's nature. However, to protect the family name, he takes it out on Joseph and throws him into prison. It was unfair and probably cost Potiphar as his property would not be managed as well by the next guy after Joseph. Yet, we still don't see Joseph yelling for his rights. Instead, we see him once again working hard and having a godly character. He had gone from slave to prisoner, but that didn't change his values or personality. He was still God's man, and this was one more step on the way in God's plan.

Life is not always fair, and justice doesn't always triumph. While unjust treatment is challenging, the Christian keeps being God's man or woman. Like Joseph, we have to keep doing what is right. It is one thing to be punished unjustly. It is another to be mad, so we deserve further punishment. Like Joseph, people will notice that we belong to God in this new situation. They will give us opportunities, and God will keep us under His protection. We rebound as we are faithful because God is still near us and has taught us how to overcome unfair situations. We do so by simply being faithful to God and following His ways.

D. Faithfulness makes you a blessing to others v. 5 *From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field.*

Through his diligence and hard work, Joseph became a blessing to Potiphar and himself. Everything under Joseph's control prospered, and so he found that the master promoted him to be in charge of everything that he owned. Joseph showed everyone that God was real. In the land of the sun god and other gods, Joseph showed that the true God he worshipped could bless everything in a way that all the false gods of Egypt did not. As a result, those who lived in God's hands prospered, and those around them were also blessed.

We often forget that our actions impact others around us. If our response to difficult times is to be angry or to go into depression, it affects our family, friends, and coworkers. However, if we are faithful and continue to follow God's path of values and character, our work will bring blessings to others. We also have a chance to witness to our Lord and show others that God is the path for their blessing in difficult times. Our work becomes a witness to the wisdom and power of God. It shows the way that God has given to us all through tough times and may lead others to come to salvation and peace as well.

Follow the Lord in all things and be blessed v. 2 *The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master.*

Joseph thrived in difficult times because he followed the Lord. Having been sold into slavery, he could have easily adopted Egyptian ways and gods. Joseph did not. He continued to worship the Lord and live as his father and grandfather had taught him. He could have easily slipped into self-pity or anger. Instead, he continued to work hard and use the gifts the Lord had given. It made him a good worker for Potiphar and the prison warden, who both promoted Joseph so that they could take advantage of his gifts and work ethic.

In difficult times, our temptation is to give up or take the easy way out. However, a better solution is to continue to follow the Lord as if there are no dark days at all. Whatever situation we find ourselves in, we need to continue to walk the godly walk of God's commandments and give our circumstances our best. It is such faithfulness to God that opens the opportunities that he wants to give us. We may be promoted like Joseph or find satisfaction in what we are doing in God's name. Faithful people don't drag themselves and others down. Instead, they are lifted by the Lord as they serve Him and do their best.

Be faithful and let the Lord take care of the rest

In the secular world, there are often no absolute standards of right or wrong that we should follow. We are free to do whatever pleases us at the moment. If we want to commit greed or adultery, it is okay. If we feel better trapped in self-pity or anger, we have earned that right because times are bad. Christians are different. We have a code of values that God has given us in his word. The Ten Commandments summarize what is good and what is bad for us. As we follow them, we will find that we don't bring ourselves down but rather have the behavior that lifts us.

In difficult times, we can't control the future, but we can walk according to God's ways, trusting that He will protect us and bring us through tough times. Our God cares about us. That is why he has taught us right from wrong. It is why we know that he has the future in hand. Life can go sour, but we must remain faithful. To be sour in life digs the hole deeper and makes it hard to get out. Only those who show God's values and character will find that they have him at their side and can trust the Lord to help them and bring them through the troubles to a great end.

3 Joseph: Overcoming being forgotten

Gen. 40:1-23

Big idea: Be patient and know that God doesn't forget us.

Genesis 40:1-23 ¹ Some time later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their master, the king of Egypt. ² Pharaoh was angry with his two officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, ³ and put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the same prison where Joseph was confined. ⁴ The captain of the guard assigned them to Joseph, and he attended them. After they had been in custody for some time, ⁵ each of the two men--the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were being held in prison--had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own. ⁶ When Joseph came to them the next morning, he saw that they were dejected. ⁷ So he asked Pharaoh's officials who were in custody with him in his master's house, "Why are your faces so sad today?" ⁸ "We both had dreams," they answered, "but there is no one to interpret them." Then Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams." ⁹ So the chief cupbearer told Joseph his dream. He said to him, "In my dream I saw a vine in front of me, ¹⁰ and on the vine were three branches. As soon as it budded, it blossomed, and its clusters ripened into grapes. ¹¹ Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes, squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup and put the cup in his hand." ¹² "This is what it means," Joseph said to him. "The three branches are three days. ¹³ Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position, and you will put Pharaoh's cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer. ¹⁴ But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. ¹⁵ For I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon." ¹⁶ When the chief baker saw that Joseph had given a favorable interpretation, he said to Joseph, "I too had a dream: On my head were three baskets of bread. ¹⁷ In the top basket were all kinds of baked goods for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating them out of the basket on my head." ¹⁸ "This is what it means," Joseph said. "The three baskets are three days. ¹⁹ Within three days Pharaoh will lift off your head and hang you on a tree. And the birds will eat away your flesh." ²⁰ Now the third day was Pharaoh's birthday, and he gave a feast for all his officials. He lifted up the heads of the chief cupbearer and the chief baker in the presence of his officials: ²¹ He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, so that he once again put the cup into Pharaoh's hand, ²² but he hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had said to them in his interpretation. ²³ The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.

Impatient in life – we want it now.

I am about ready for the current crisis to be over. How about you? We have shortages at the grocery store. We need help as politicians can't agree on a course for the nation. We have people out of work and those refusing to work. I am impatient about other things. I get annoyed when things take too long, or something gets canceled. I wonder how the people of colonial times managed when it took all morning to cook a meal or hours to travel what we could do in one hour or less.

The trouble is that life takes time. It takes thirteen years to go from Kindergarten to High school graduation. They only let you have your unrestricted driver's license once you are 17. Even Christmas makes you wait a whole year for the next Christmas. Everything takes too much time. The problem with impatience is that we feel forgotten. We feel like people are not thinking about our needs. We want to have fun and not be restricted in what we can do or say. When will it end? Such was the feeling of Joseph in the text. He felt forgotten and impatient because he thought it would never end.

A. 10 years in prison and Joseph feels forgotten v. 1 *Some time later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their master, the king of Egypt.*

It had been ten years since he was sold into slavery by his brothers. First, he had been a slave for Potiphar wasting his youth serving a man who did not treat him well when Potiphar's wife had tried to

seduce him. He had worked so hard for that man only to be mistreated. Now he languished in prison. Yes, it was a nice prison. It was the one for political prisoners and may have even been more of a house arrest, but it was still a prison, and he was not free to go. He served those of the upper crust of society who displeased the king. Will he ever be remembered and freed?

She lies in a hospital bed, wondering if anyone will come and visit or if no one cares. He seems stuck between a rock and a hard place as he tries to get his car fixed, but the dealer will not honor the warranty. She has been working this low-level job. Will they ever see her ability and promote her? There are a lot of people who feel forgotten in life. They could list all their complaints and all the times that someone should have noticed them or helped them. Instead, they are in limbo, wondering if they will ever be remembered and helped. Where is God, and why doesn't he care?

B. The proper focus was God v. 8. *Then Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams."*

Joseph had experienced two dreams before this, but they were about him and his greatness. Now he heard about another's dream and knew it came from God. While the dream was unclear to the cupbearer, Joseph knew the origin of this vision. As we see, it is from God. It was God working in the life of Joseph, preparing him for the day when the cupbearer would remember him and mention that he could interpret dreams to the king. Joseph, for this moment, could see the hand of God working in his life, and he put the focus on God and not on himself.

We will see times in life when we can see the hand of God working in our life. Like Joseph, it may not be time for the ultimate prize to come. It may even be God checking our faith to see if we are still listening and following Him. It may just be that we see the hand of God working in our life. Patience focuses on God and knows that God is still working to make things better for us. Sometimes we see what God is doing, and we likewise think that redemption is near. Sometimes it is, and sometimes, God gives us a sign to provide us with hope or prepare us for the future.

C. Impatience makes us try to fix the future v. 14 *But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison.*

Where Joseph goes wrong is that he tries to fix the future. Having seen that the cupbearer will be returned to the palace in three days, Joseph tries to make a deal with the cupbearer to use his position to get Joseph out of prison. He even makes his case for his innocence, so the man doesn't forget. Yet, it wasn't time. If Joseph had been released at this time, he could never have interpreted Pharaoh's dream. Instead, he would have left for Palestine and been starving with his family when he was supposed to save Egypt and his family.

We often destroy God's plan with our impatience. Our impatience wants to have things now, so we manipulate the future instead of waiting for God. It may be alright to prepare for the future you wish for with education or particular work. Just don't expect God to follow your plan instead of His. How do we know the difference? Do we pin our hopes on our plan as Joseph does, or do we lay out possibilities and see what God does with them? To push our agenda is wrong. To open ourselves to possibilities from God and let him choose what is best is a better way.

D. Our plans without God will get nowhere v23 *The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.*

Because it was not God's plan, the cupbearer forgot about Joseph for two years. Only when the Pharaoh had a dream that God wanted Joseph to interpret did the cupbearer think about Joseph. It just wasn't God's time. Joseph had some growing to do, and the time was not ready. While we may think that strange, we must remember that both King David and St. Paul had to wait 10 or more years before their ministry began. David wandered in the desert, learning from God and evading King Saul. St. Paul spent 14 years from his conversion before he made the first missionary journey.

Sometimes we are just not ready for the things we ask of God. We need more time to be prepared for the perfect job or spouse. We have yet to grow as a person in our character or skills to handle what we want. God keeps saying later. He has something better in mind. Be patient, and it will be yours at the right time. We know that at the right time, about two years later, Joseph would have his chance at freedom and so much more. God's plans are grand, and they take time to prepare us and others. Whatever we are impatient to have, God has something so much better in mind for us.

Things come in God's time and God's reason.

Looking back, we can see each step of God's plan. Joseph was sold into slavery so that he would be in Egypt in the house of one of the elite. He would be imprisoned with Pharaoh's prisoners so he could meet the cupbearer who would remember him finally. Each thing looked bad, but God made it good. It would have been nice if it had happened faster, but was Joseph ready? Surely, the 17-year-old sold by his brothers didn't have the maturity or knowledge to lead Egypt. Yet, a 30-year-old man who had come in contact with the upper echelon of Egyptian society would know the culture and rulers of Egypt.

Things come in God's time and with God's plan. I am slowly learning to be patient about our country's economy and conflicts worldwide. God has a plan with both to use the bad that has come for the good of his people. People may learn from our problems as a nation or see a revival in the church. This time will educate us about the problems so that leaders and the American people grow and are ready to deal with the issues. Maybe God has another answer. You and I need to be patient and let God work. We can propose ideas, but only God will be able to change our culture.

Enjoy the season you are in, and trust God for the future.

So what do we do in the meantime? It is nice to know that God will do something, but I sometimes struggle and am afraid of the future. So the first is to trust God and look back at all the times that the nation and people you know have been in trouble, and God had a plan so that things worked out. I sometimes think that problems are like elementary school. You may wish you could be older and be in high school when you are just in fifth grade, but the best thing is to sit back and enjoy your current season of life. Enjoy the present, and stop wishing God would give you more.

God was good to Joseph. He lived in an upper-crust home and then in a prison that was better than where the average Egyptian lived. God was taking care of him and gave him a better standard of living than most Egyptians had. Most of us have a good life. God has not abandoned us. We still have many pleasures. Enjoy what you have while God is furthering his plan for you. Trust him and know that God has not forgotten you. You are unique to Him, and He will continue to provide. You can't change the future, but you can open your life with possibilities so that God can give you what He wants you to have in the right season.

4 Joseph: Overcoming worldly wisdom

Gen. 41:14-40

Big idea: God is the true source of wisdom in crisis.

Genesis 41:14-40 ¹⁴ So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh. ¹⁵ Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it." ¹⁶ "I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires." ¹⁷ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "In my dream I was standing on the bank of the Nile, ¹⁸ when out of the river there came up seven cows, fat and sleek, and they grazed among the reeds. ¹⁹ After them, seven other cows came up--scrawny and very ugly and lean. I had never seen such ugly cows in all the land of Egypt. ²⁰ The lean, ugly cows ate up the seven fat cows that came up first. ²¹ But even after they ate them, no one could tell that they had done so; they looked just as ugly as before. Then I woke up. ²² "In my dreams I also saw seven heads of grain, full and good, growing on a single stalk. ²³ After them, seven other heads sprouted--withered and thin and scorched by the east wind. ²⁴ The thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven good heads. I told this to the magicians, but none could explain it to me." ²⁵ Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, "The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁶ The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good heads of grain are seven years; it is one and the same dream. ²⁷ The seven lean, ugly cows that came up afterward are seven years, and so are the seven worthless heads of grain scorched by the east wind: They are seven years of famine. ²⁸ "It is just as I said to Pharaoh: God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁹ Seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt, ³⁰ but seven years of famine will follow them. Then all the abundance in Egypt will be forgotten, and the famine will ravage the land. ³¹ The abundance in the land will not be remembered, because the famine that follows it will be so severe. ³² The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon. ³³ "And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. ³⁴ Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. ³⁵ They should collect all the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh, to be kept in the cities for food. ³⁶ This food should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine." ³⁷ The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. ³⁸ So Pharaoh asked them, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?" ³⁹ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. ⁴⁰ You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you."

In a crisis, there is a need for wisdom.

In a crisis, there is a need for wisdom. For example, the furnace or car breaks down. You look for an expert to find and fix what is wrong. If you are saving for retirement, you find someone with wisdom that helps you figure out where and what to invest so you will be ready for the future. The same is true in life. Experts come on the morning talk shows and tell us how to live our life. They will tell us how to raise our children or what we should believe about current societal issues. We listen to and follow them because we are hungry for advice when we don't know what to do.

They may know how to cook or manage their finances, but they get so many things wrong about how to live life. They have a secular mindset and follow current ideas and their own bias instead of listening to the one who truly knows the future and how life works. In the text, we see a world searching for wisdom that only God can give. Joseph will stand out because he acknowledges, listens to, and follows God. He will stand out in a foolish world because he speaks with the Spirit of God. Oh, that the Lord would send someone like him today.

A. The world searches for wisdom but can't find it. v. 15 *Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it."*

Imagine the scene in verse 15. The Pharaoh has had a significant dream, and no one knows what it means. The wise men of the kingdom are stumped, and everyone is at wit's end, wondering what the gods of Egypt are warning the kingdom about. A man who has been a prisoner is brought before the Pharaoh because he is rumored to have the answers. Everyone strains to hear what he will say, for they are desperate to know what is coming. Human wisdom has failed them, and they hope this Godly man can fill the void.

When we face pandemics, science and medicine have had no answers. Doctors come on television frantic, and our leaders act daily in fear of the unknown destroying their economies and, at times, making things worse. Their only advice has been to hide in your homes and not come out. No one has listened to the church or sought answers in the Bible. No one has asked the churches to pray as they did after 9-11. Science will provide a solution, and things will be fine when we get a cure. But, instead, we have searched for wisdom and found ourselves empty like the court of Pharaoh.

Bringing Godly wisdom to our world

B. Acknowledge God as the source of wisdom v. 16 *"I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires."*

At first, they treat him like he is another person with worldly wisdom. He corrects them and points to the Lord. Only God can give the answers that they desire. Only God can see the future and provide the interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams. Joseph will not glorify himself but shows God is the source of wisdom. The dreams are to give glory to a God that the Egyptian people do not know. The dreams are a warning from the Almighty so that the nation of Egypt is not destroyed by famine and the Lord's purpose for His people will be fulfilled. God's wise plans will now be revealed.

Christians have bibles on their shelves but seldom use them in America. Instead, we treat God's wisdom in the scriptures as just another opinion we could embrace. Such an attitude is foolish. Only God can tell us how to work our jobs, raise our families, and even manage our money. None of the wisdom of our world knows the future. God does. The knowledge of our world pools our ignorance in polls and declares it to be the standard. God's scripture contains the wisdom of the ages. Those who acknowledge that it is far superior to the world's knowledge will have an advantage in life.

C. Listen to God's plan in crisis v. 25 *Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, "The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do."*

Joseph exceeds the Pharaoh's request and boldly tells the nation's leader what God is calling him to do. It is a bold plan that takes advantage of the warning God gave the Egyptian people. Gather the grain during the good years so you can survive the bad years to come. Joseph is confident of God's will and shares the wisdom of the Lord with the pagans around him. They listen to God's plan, for they sense that God alone speaks wisdom during this time of crisis. God's wisdom makes sense, and they realize it is the only solution to their trouble.

Churches in Bible study and prayer find that God reveals His plan for them. They listen to what the Lord says, the church members grow, and they attract others who also want to grow in the Lord. Good times and bad are coming, but God knows how to get us through the troubles and prosper. Nations would be wise to listen to the Lord and follow his plan instead of the worldly wisdom pouring forth from the television. The massive grab for power and the idea that science is our only hope rhetoric is destroying our nation. Pray for the Lord to send a Joseph who can stand up and give God's plan.

D. Carry out God's plan for His people v. 34 *Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance.*

If the plan is to work, the people of Egypt must follow the strategy. The plan was simple. They were to appoint an administrator and other officers who gathered grain in the good years and distributed it to the people in the bad. In that way, the nation would not perish due to famine. The following verses show that the Pharaoh and his people did just that. To know the plan without following it would have done them very little good. In obeying God's will, the people received the benefit of God's wisdom. Obedience brought the saving of the nation.

Once a church or a nation listens to God, they need to obey God. They need to obey the Lord in their lives, following His commandments and wisdom in life. They need to live as a church with God's values and character. They even follow his wisdom as they move forward together. Is it any wonder that our nation is torn by violence and that people struggle daily? Even many of the Christians in our country have stopped following the Lord's ways. His word is seen as optional or just plain antiquated. If we want to get past our nation's troubles, we need to obey the Lord once again.

Will you live by man's wisdom or God's wisdom? V. 37 *The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials.*

Joseph took a risk in telling Pharaoh what needed to be done. Fortunately, Pharaoh was wise enough to see that God's wisdom was better than anything in the kingdom. As a result, he was willing to live by God's wisdom, and his whole kingdom benefitted. You can't force others to be wise, but you can live and share God's wisdom in your life. You can spend time daily in scripture so the Lord can teach you. You can listen and follow His will in your life to be a better worker, parent, spouse, and friend.

As a church, we will rise and fall on how we view the scripture. We must encourage all church members to be in bible classes so that they learn from the Lord. We must bathe everything we do in prayer so that the Lord is our leader. We must strive to follow the Lord in all that we do. The church must lead the way so that when the world realizes that they are in crisis, they turn to the Lord. As our cities burn and the virus rages, may the nation recognize that science and politics do not have the answers. Let them see the personal victories of God's people and be open to God's plan.

God's wisdom stands out in a foolish world v. 38 *So Pharaoh asked them, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?"*

True wisdom is not achieved by education but by listening to the all-wise God. God gives his people a special gift in His word. In scripture, they can learn the truth about the world and how to navigate the good and bad times. They can live by faith and not give into crisis. Those who want that wisdom will find it in the pages of scripture. The more time you spend in scripture, the more you will learn how to be a good parent, spouse, and friend. In these pages is wisdom on topics from friendship to finance. Nothing in the world can equal them.

When you have learned them, obey them. Let the Bible be your guide for life and follow its plan. Learn to act like some of the great saints and work to avoid the pitfalls they all had. Let God be your daily partner so that you let Him lead and guide you through life. If you do so, you will stand out like Joseph. You will survive the troubles because God will protect and provide for you. You will be a blessing to others and help them through the hardships of life. The world will get through the current challenges only as the people of God stand up and show them their Lord and His wisdom in life.

5 Joseph: Overcoming Bitterness

Gen. 45:1-18

Big idea: Overcome bitterness by looking toward God, not man.

Genesis 45:1-18 ¹ Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it. ³ Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. ⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!" ⁵ And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ⁶ For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. ⁷ But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. ⁸ "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. ⁹ Now hurry back to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay.' ¹⁰ You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me--you, your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all you have. ¹¹ I will provide for you there, because five years of famine are still to come. Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute.' ¹² "You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother Benjamin, that it is really I who am speaking to you. ¹³ Tell my father about all the honor accorded me in Egypt and about everything you have seen. And bring my father down here quickly." ¹⁴ Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. ¹⁵ And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him. ¹⁶ When the news reached Pharaoh's palace that Joseph's brothers had come, Pharaoh and all his officials were pleased. ¹⁷ Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Tell your brothers, 'Do this: Load your animals and return to the land of Canaan,' ¹⁸ and bring your father and your families back to me. I will give you the best of the land of Egypt and you can enjoy the fat of the land."

Bitter about the way you have been treated.

We see them at the grocery store and want to duck down another aisle. It is someone from work who blamed you for a failed project. The former neighbor called the cops on you because the kids shot off some fireworks. It is the family member who has mistreated you, and you just don't want to have anything to do with them. We are bitter and feel we have a right to be so. Why make a friendly conversation when you don't want to talk with them? Why pretend that the incident didn't even happen when it still makes your blood boil to think about it? You don't want to lie or pretend things are OK when they aren't.

Joseph has spent several chapters testing his brothers because he wants to have a relationship with them but may be afraid that things haven't changed. When Judah offers his own life to save the life of Benjamin and not cause his father any more grief, Joseph's heart is broken. He wants his family back. He clears the room and begins the process of reconciliation. His love for his family and his vision of what God has accomplished overcome his bitterness. He teaches us that there are times to put aside our resentment so that we can become whole and regain what we have lost.

Joseph's steps to overcome bitterness

A. Reach out to those who have hurt you v. 3 *Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.*

His words must have hit them like a ton of bricks. He claimed to be their dead brother, who they had sold into slavery 22 years before. No Egyptian should know the name of Joseph, let alone claim to be their lost brother. Terror and fear overwhelmed them as they stepped back in apprehension. Joseph would

not be daunted. Instead, he encouraged them to step closer. He wept with a mixture of joy at the reunion and sadness at how much he had lost. They could not reach out to him because of their guilt and lack of recognition, so Joseph reached out to them so the healing could begin.

There are some relationships that we need to heal. It may be a sister or child who has drifted out of our life. It may be someone we called a dear friend who hurt us with their words or actions. It may be a fellow church member we argued with at the parking lot. Life has changed. They or we have changed, and we realize that we are not whole without them. You could wait for them to reach out to you but sometimes you come to understand that to be whole, you need to reach out to them. You can't leave that hurt poisoning your heart and life any longer.

B. Recognize when God makes good come from evil v. 7 *But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.*

Joseph chooses at this moment to think of God and not his brothers. He does not deny the evil that the brothers had done to him. Instead, he chooses to think of the good God has brought out of evil. God had used their treachery to bring Joseph to Egypt to save the family. In focusing on God, Joseph encourages the brothers to recognize God's hand in their lives and to trust God's care for the family as they join him in Egypt. He speaks from a loving and forgiving heart that has developed as God taught him through hardship to see the gracious hand of God.

It is easy to be wrapped up in others and the hurt they caused. It is better to look at how the Lord has brought you through the troubles and how the Lord is still with you. The experience may have taught you the depth of love or taught you valuable lessons. It may turn a corner in your life. God has a way of using both the good and bad in our lives to move us along the path he has chosen for us instead of focusing on what people have done. So if we are to fix the hole in our hearts or the poison in our souls, we need to look to what God is doing and not dwell on the actions of others.

C. Give blessings to them not punishment v. 9 *Now hurry back to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me Lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay.'*

Joseph now carries out God's plan. He knows there are five years left of the famine, so he invites the whole family to come and live in Egypt, where he can provide for them. They are to go home and gather their father and their families so that they might all come and share his food. God had a further reason for wanting to bring them. In Egypt, the family would prosper and not become assimilated into the Canaanite people. They would blossom from 70 people who made the journey to over 500,000 who left with Moses to reclaim the Promised Land. What a blessing.

Ours is a generous God, and He often gives us a chance to be generous as well. There may be circumstances where someone who has hurt you has not changed, so you still can't fully trust them. Yet, it is never your task to punish them for their evil. Leave that to God, who is the judge of all. We are free to be generous with the gifts that God has blessed us with in life. It may be an offer to travel to see a lost sister or family member. It might be gifts you send that you know will be meaningful to them. Our relationship with God frees us to be generous with what we have, trusting God to care for us.

D. Reconcile and be one again v. 15 *And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward, his brothers talked with him.*

It was not a time for excuses or apologies. It was a time to make up for years of separation with love and forgiveness. The hidden sin was out in the open, and the generous offer to care for his family was on the table. Now Joseph couldn't wait to love and be loved by his family. Then there was so much of life to catch up. I am sure the brothers wanted to know how their arrogant brother became second in command in Egypt. Joseph would like to know about his father and his brother's families. Fellowship was restored, and they were acting like brothers once again. What joy that must have been for Joseph.

Having traveled to see an estranged sister, you don't wait for hugs. Having made up with an old friend who did you wrong, you may offer to go out to dinner together. The relationship has made significant steps to being healed. Now it is time to seal the deal. We have the person back in our lives, and we want to take the next step so that we don't lose them again. If the person is important enough to you, you will want to have them for the rest of your life. You will laugh and share what has happened. You will set the tone so that the first meeting is not the last.

Love has to be stronger than bitterness v. 13 *Tell my father about all the honor accorded me in Egypt and about everything you have seen. And bring my father down here quickly."*

It was his plea about whether his father was living that launched the reconciliation and his appeal that the brothers bring his father to Egypt that brought home the depth of Joseph's love. Love for his family was stronger than any bitterness he felt for the brothers' actions. Bitterness was also gone because Joseph saw the hand of God. Joseph had made great sacrifices spending thirteen years in slavery or prison, but God had used the pain to save his family. Even Joseph could see that the pain was worth the blessing. God had done the impossible, and he had benefitted.

There will be some, like the used car salesperson or the fifth-grade teacher who did you wrong, that it may be wise to forgive and forget. It is not a relationship you need. But, on the other hand, some people are important to you because they are family, a special friend, or a fellow church member you care about. Love and friendship, in those cases, need to be greater than bitterness. These are people who have contributed to your life. These people may miss you as much as you miss them. It is worth the effort. It is worth being the child of a forgiving God who has learned to love and forgive.

Look at what God can do, not what man has done v. 8 *So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, Lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt.*

If you want to get past the bitterness, you have to look at what God has done and not what man has done. In times of disaster, we often have no idea of the good that God will bring from them. We are in pain, and someone has caused that pain. We feel a right to be bitter. Let the years that often ensue give you time to pause and ask what God has done in the meantime. What has God taught you in the five years since that incident? In what ways has God blessed you over the last decade that might not have happened if the pain hadn't come?

Weigh your need to fill the hole or get rid of the poison of anger and hate. Then act just like Joseph did. Take the time to reach out and reconcile with someone special at one time in your life. Be generous because God has been generous to you. Show you are a child of God. You may have the chance to re-establish a meaningful relationship. If nothing else, you will have the opportunity to take a load of guilt away even if they don't want to reconnect with you. Look at the blessings that the Lord has given you and realize how blessed you are that he will never break the relationship with you.

6 Joseph: Overcoming Fear

Gen. 50:15-21

Big idea: Forgiveness conquers Fear.

Genesis 50:15-21 ¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" ¹⁶ So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: ¹⁷ 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept. ¹⁸ His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said. ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. ²¹ So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

How do I know that I am forgiven? V.15 *When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?"*

Sin can haunt us forever. Divorce changes the future of our kids, grandkids, and even second spouses. Get arrested, and your record follows you and impacts the jobs you can get and the life you will live. The question we often wonder is if God can forgive us. Sometimes we wonder about salvation itself. Such was the feeling of the brothers. It had been seventeen years of good times in Egypt, living on the best land and having blessings because Joseph was in charge. Now their father had died, and they wondered if the good times were about to end. They wondered if the forgiveness was real.

Joseph had been kind during the seventeen years, but they didn't see how Joseph couldn't have a grudge. They had hurt him badly, and they didn't believe he meant all that stuff about God bringing good out of bad. His love for them had made no impact on their hearts. I have known a lot of Christians who don't believe that God forgave them of some sin years ago. Every bad thing in life must be a punishment for their sin. Here in this text, we see in Joseph's forgiveness the truth about God's forever forgiveness to us.

Our response to sin and Fear

A. Admit your guilt v. 17a *'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.'*

If you want to be forgiven, you have to admit your guilt. Sadly, the brothers were afraid to approach Joseph personally, but they did admit what they had done. They admitted to each other the evil they had done and now confessed it in a message to their brother. It had been a severe offense, and almost forty years later was still on their minds. It may have been that they had not forgiven themselves for such treachery. On the other hand, it may have been that they would have found it hard to forgive someone who had mistreated them. So they put into words their guilt to Joseph.

We can try to hide our sin or tell ourselves that it wasn't so bad, but we will never rid ourselves of the guilt and shame without admitting what we did fully. Sin must be brought out into the open so it can be forgiven and healing can begin. That can be difficult, and we would rather think that the sin is safely in the past, but we will have our doubts and wonder if God forgave the sin every time something terrible happens. A sin out in the open is one that you never have to lie about or be afraid that someone will find out about it. The first step to overcoming Fear is to admit your sin.

B. Ask for forgiveness v. 17b. *Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father."*

Whether Jacob, their father, had asked Joseph to forgive is questionable. The brothers surely wanted to be forgiven. They based their request on kinship and a shared faith in the God of Abraham. Certainly, Joseph would forgive either because of his father's request or because God willed forgiveness. Their

request was sincere and based on the fact that they had repented and openly confessed what they had done so long ago against Joseph. They knew he had the power to destroy them all for what they had done. They just hoped that he would show kindness as God had done.

Only those who know they have sinned and confessed their sin can receive forgiveness. Those who do not believe they have sinned see no reason to be forgiven. Those who realize their sin throw themselves on the mercy of God. They know He can punish them but hope that He will show mercy. How do we know God will forgive? We know so because of His word of scripture. Time and time again, God shows Himself to be a forgiving God who accepts the plea of those who repent. We see that when David or Peter repented. We have God's promise of forgiveness in several places.

Forgiveness is forever

C. Joseph weeps that they doubt his forgiveness v. 17c *When their message came to him, Joseph wept.*

The request made Joseph weep. It was not because he didn't want to forgive. It was because Joseph had forgiven them years before, and they still were in fear. It hurt him deeply that they didn't recognize that he had forgiven them long ago. What more could he have done to convince them that his forgiveness was sincere? Did his father have doubts that he had truly forgiven, or did his brothers make that up? God had forgiven them for their sin. How could Joseph seek revenge when God had not done so?

How can God convince us that forgiveness is forever? Satan will try to tell us that God is fickle and that we always need to be afraid of the Almighty God, who punishes the wicked. Yet, anyone who knows scripture knows that it is untrue. Did God abandon Abraham, David, or Peter for their sin? God must weep when His people doubt his forgiveness and love. God must also cringe when people stay away from church instead of returning in times of distress. God is the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son who welcomes back the sinner and is eager to forgive.

D. Joseph reassures them the blessings are forever v. 21 *So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.*

Sadly, when Joseph invites them to his home to clear up the confusion, they throw themselves on the floor and offer themselves as his slaves. Joseph must have been mortified. He wanted brothers and not slaves, so he assured them of his forgiveness and provision. Nothing will change just because their father is gone. He not only forgave them but assured them of his constant care. The homes and food that they had would continue to be theirs. Nothing had changed and never would. Forgiveness is forever when it comes from God and His people.

When you feel guilty, come and let the Lord reassure you in His word. Open up the psalms or any of the stories of the saints who sinned and see how the Lord forgives those who repent. Let God comfort you and chase away all of Satan's claims that are meant to make you feel so guilty. God will reassure the penitent sinner and will remind them of the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins so that we do not need to feel guilty. We are forgiven and will be children of God through this life and the next. God's love never ends. His forgiveness and mercy are given freely and eternally.

Real forgiveness is like God's forgiveness.

God is generous and forgiving v. 20 *You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*

Joseph had told his brothers a truth about God seventeen years before this text, and he repeated it because they had forgotten. God is generous and has a means of taking the bad that happens to us and bringing good from it. For over 25 years, he has had riches and a purpose for God. God is more generous than Joseph could have ever imagined. All the wealth of his family was nothing compared to what God had given him in Egypt and what he was able to give his family here as well. Joseph's forgiveness is based on what God has done and is still doing.

God's people will be different. They will have real forgiveness, not forgiveness that is convenient or suits their purpose. Their forgiveness comes because God has been generous, forgiving, and helped them when people hurt them. They know the relief that comes from forgiveness, and they want to give it to others with no strings or worries. God washes away sin entirely so that he completely forgets it. He will not bring up again or punish us later for a sin that He has forgiven.

Forgiveness changes the future v. 22 *Joseph stayed in Egypt, along with all his father's family. He lived a hundred and ten years.*

Forgiveness changed everything. Joseph would live almost 55 years after his father's death in the company of his brothers and their families. The tension would slowly die, and all would know they were loved and had nothing to fear. His forgiveness of the brothers blessed Joseph. Giving and accepting forgiveness need to be part of every Christian's life. Like the brothers, we need to accept forgiveness from others so that we do not have to live in guilt or fear. The cross of Jesus has forgiven us, and we need to forgive ourselves when we repent and come to those we hurt.

We also need to be eager to give forgiveness. When people hurt us and repent, we need to be as generous to them as God is to us. It will change our future and bring back into our lives significant people who we love and want to have as a part of our lives. The answer to fear is often forgiveness. We have nothing to fear from God if we daily confess our sins and accept that God will always forgive us. We will find our life filled with joy if we forgive and are forgiven so that the barriers of fear and anger do not control our life. Be generous as God is generous, and life will be filled with joy.

Reformation

Guilt is gone when grace given Rom. 3:19-31

Big idea: You have been given a second chance. Use it.

Romans 3:19-31 ¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. ²¹ But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished-- ²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. ²⁷ Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. ²⁸ For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. ²⁹ Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, ³⁰ since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. ³¹ Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.

I am not good enough.

We are not good enough. We are told that all the time. We live in a region with million-dollar homes and lots of fancy cars. People around us make a lot more money than we do. Television commercials tell us that happiness is in having all kinds of things we cannot afford. We need to be better. At our jobs, we are responsible for everything that goes wrong. A project is late. It must have been us. A detail is missing. That must be us too. We are praised for little and expected to do so much and do it perfectly. We are just not good enough.

We live in a society that likes to find guilt. You are the reason your children are not perfect. You are too tall or too short. You are impatient or too tolerant with your coworkers and friends. At times, you feel like you can't do anything right. You need to be better. And a quick look at our life helps us see all our failures. We see the wasted opportunities and the places you did the wrong thing. What if you could be given a second chance? What if someone were willing to stand up for you and end the guilt? What would you give for such an opportunity?

Am I just stuck with bad feelings?

I am not good enough is true v.23 *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

The first thing you need to know is that you are not alone. Everyone here and in the world sins. We can rank our sins and say it is not as bad as Hitler or Jack the ripper, but that doesn't mean we don't have sins. We still sin, and we sin a lot. We have the sins of commission – the times that we do bad things. We lie or stretch the truth. We steal even if it is only times when we are lazy. We have thoughts we can't control. We have fits of anger and tell gossip. Why anyone would want to be around us is beyond me.

We have sins of omission – the times we don't do something good. It can be as simple as the thank you card you should have sent or the person you walked by when he was in need. It is the stack of things that could have helped your family or your callousness to the community's needs. The stack gets big as we add new sins to old ones daily. It is enough to kill an elephant, and it is all mine. It doesn't matter if my stack is an inch shorter or a foot taller than yours. It weighs me down at times and makes me feel so small. I am not good enough.

I have a feeling that I can not make it right v.19 *so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.*

And there is nothing that you can do to make it right. You can say that you are sorry if you forget to meet with a client or pick up the dry cleaning for your spouse. You can stand there and look stupid while someone chews you out for a simple mistake. After all, what can you say? You wish you could have a time machine so that you could go back and do the right thing. I fear that you or I would spend so much time in the machine trying to undo the past that we would never live in the present. Our sins are just that bad and that many.

Our sins have gotten so bad that we no longer try to justify them. Instead, we pretend with others that they are not sins. They are just how we became after the fall, and you have to face our imperfections. We think that even God should just live with it. If God or anyone else can't do that, we walk away from them. Millions live in those little bubbles of self-righteousness. We have made it politically incorrect to say anything about a host of sins and bad habits. Love me as I am. Love me as I destroy myself. I am stuck with these sins and destructive behaviors. Just live with it.

A fantastic gift has been given.

My guilt has been taken away v.24 *are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

Yet, there is another way. It is a gift from God that does what I cannot do. God has seen our plight and has taken away our sins. It saved Martin Luther when he was struggling under a load of guilt. God has declared us to be guilt-free. We just have to believe it and accept it. It was a moment that freed Luther. He was a monk who scrubbed floors and beat himself all in an effort to try to take away the sins that he knew he was doing. Then he read the book of Romans and saw that God had done what he could not. He was free from sin.

The truth of the reformation is that you and I can give our guilt to God. We don't have to make up for the sins that we have committed. We don't have to carry around the knowledge that five years ago, we lied, stole, or cheated someone, and we can never forgive ourselves. God has taken away that sin. It is as if it never happened. It will never be brought up again. He did this because he loves us. We didn't earn it or deserve it, but he still did it just for us. That is the freeing message of Paul. It is the message that lifts the guilt off Luther and us.

God made an incredible sacrifice for me v.25 *God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.*

How was God able to do this miracle? He did it by making someone else pay for our sins. He gave Jesus our guilt and sin and made him pay for it on the cross. You and I could not pay for our sins, but the sinless Jesus, who did not deserve to die, could die in payment for our sins. The price for our salvation was not cheap. The price for our salvation was not easy. The price for our salvation was not simple. It meant nothing less than God the son becoming human and standing in for us. It meant that God became human to take our pain, punishment, and death.

Maybe the reason that so many refuse to believe in it is that it is such an enormous gift. You see, Jesus died for all men to take away their sin and guilt, but only a relative handful of people living have this gift. The rest have refused to believe and still live in shame and with the threat of punishment. Jesus brought salvation, yet that salvation will only have an effect if people believe in what His lifeblood has purchased. You never earn salvation by believing, but you do need faith to have the free salvation that Jesus gave. Lutherans thus teach salvation by grace through faith.

Using my second chance

Accepting the free gift v.21 *But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known*

The problem for many Lutherans is that they need to catch up on the second part. Jesus did indeed give salvation free and clear. There is no payment that you have to make to get it. There is no quest you must go on to learn the secret. Even the thief on the cross was promised salvation after doing nothing. Yet, if you are going to receive the benefit of salvation, you have to bring it into your life. Someone could promise you free meals for the rest of your life, but you will get no benefit if you don't eat. In the same way, you will get no help if you keep Jesus away.

The power of salvation comes when you make the Lord a priority. It comes to those who worship the Lord weekly, including him in their life. It comes to those who are daily in prayer and bible study so that the Lord can hear their hurts and feed their souls. It comes when people make Jesus a priority in their life because putting him at the side of life robs you of the benefits that a strong relationship with Jesus can bring. Christians who put God on the side will have the same feelings of guilt and struggles with sin that non-Christians have because they will not have the power of God in their life.

Starting over with a clean slate v.22 *This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*

And making this salvation a part of your daily life will change the quality and character of your life. It changes your past. If you sin, pray to the Lord and claim his forgiveness. Let him wash away the sin and take away the guilt. You don't have to let the past haunt you. It changes the present. You live in a relationship with the Lord, and you spend time daily in prayer and his word. That means that you have inside knowledge, so you make better choices. It means that you walk with a mighty God at your side, helping you along the way. As a result, life works better with Jesus.

It changes the future. Everyone tells you that they can help you prepare for the future. But how do they know what the future will bring? Jesus does know the future. He promises to be with you as you walk in this life and will bring you to heaven in the next. The future is not so scary when Jesus is there. All is made new when you realize what the grace of Jesus can do for your life. You can and will live differently. You have a clean slate from the past and a bright future because you will walk with Jesus. It is what Luther learned in the reformation, and it is what Lutherans have enjoyed since.

Who could you give a second chance to?

The only question I would ask is, "who are you going to give this second chance to?" Oddly, we Lutherans have been selfish with this gift of grace. We have sat back and been content to let the rest of the world suffer with guilt and fear while we are calm and relaxed. Thousands of people around us need to hear about the grace of Jesus from the cross. Talk to them and pray with them when they feel guilt or fear. Let them experience the power of prayer and the help of Jesus in their life.

Open up the bible and study its message with them. Let Jesus speak to them. Start with the gospel of Mark and read it together with someone so that they can see how Jesus is different than the world portrays him. Let them see his love and his compassion. Our Lord has given you a second chance. It is salvation by grace. Use it for yourself and live in its love. Then offer that joy to others. It doesn't even matter if they become part of your church. Just give it away, for the grace of God will change their life. Guilt is gone when grace is given. Amen.

Character in the last days

The last days before the final judgment will be challenging for all who are alive at that time. The question is how we should live in preparation for those times. The four messages in this series show us the character of those who will thrive by God's grace in those times. First, we are to be righteous and live like Jesus, not give into the world around us. Second, we are to be ready by immersing ourselves in God's word. Third, we are to be faithful and willing to take risks for the Lord because we believe in God's values and love. Finally, we are to be diligent and not give up on what the Lord has called us to do because it is hard or the last day takes too long to get here. It will be Christian character and devotion to the Lord that carries each of us through the hardship of the last days. Live in Jesus, not in the world, so that you may be victorious to the end.

1 Be righteous

Matthew 5:1-12

Big idea: Look to Jesus, live like Jesus

Matthew 5:1-12 ¹ Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them, saying: ³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. ⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. ¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Coming to Jesus for answers

Crowds came to Jesus in His day v.1 *Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down.*

Jesus had become a great success. His tour around Galilee had brought crowds as people traveled for days from modern-day Israel, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon to be with Jesus. They needed what he had to give them. They needed His peace and His healing. And He had given it freely – traveling up and down the countryside caring for their sick, answering their questions, touching their hearts. They longed for authentic teaching verified by miracles. They had never seen anything like it, and they wanted more.

The Pharisees of Jesus' day had emphasized righteous character as obeying externals like fasting, the Sabbath, and giving. Instead, Jesus described a character that flowed from within. Yes, it would result in behaviors like fasting and sacrificial service, but it was the cause of those things, not the effect. As he took his disciples away from the crowds, he was touched by the needs of the crowds who struggled to find the truth. In what we have come to know as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus would teach us where to find righteousness in tough times and how to live it out in our lives.

Those who will survive will come to Jesus in our time.

It is a powerful message for our times. People are just as lost as they were in Jesus' day. So many are struggling with illness and getting no actual relief. So many are pressed in by worry and fear as the world around us is falling apart. So many are lost and have no one to tell them how to improve life. They are also disgusted with empty religion, just as the people were in Jesus' day. They have seen the church fold in on itself and not care for the community. They have seen the scandal with priests and empty rituals and customs that often afflict the church.

People are searching for someone who can help them survive in a tough 21st century. They are looking for answers and healing. What they need is Jesus. For Jesus is the one who can give them answers and

help them live them. He is the one who can help us survive. What is commonly known as the beatitudes show how to be blessed in a world filled with failure. It teaches us what real righteousness is all about and helps us to create a new heart that results in praise and worship rather than just going through the motions of being a Christian and struggling in this world.

Look to Jesus

Looking up and not inside ourselves v. 3 *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Blessed are those who know that they are empty and need what Jesus has. Even though tens of thousands would come to Jesus, there were hundreds of thousands, including most priests, who didn't think they needed Jesus. They were proud and saw this humble rabbi as unimportant. Blessed are those today who know that life is not working. Their spirits are broken. Their hearts are torn in two with sorrows and pains. They have tried every self-help book on the shelf and have only an empty wallet to show for it.

These are the ones who are blessed, for they are coming to Jesus for answers. They are opening up their bibles and finding how to live. They are spending time with him in worship and prayer asking questions and getting answers. They have a righteousness that is based on Jesus. They look up to him when they need answers, and they find them. They find their lives steering the right course in this troubled world because Jesus is at the helm. They will survive, and they will thrive because Jesus is guiding them. Jesus is their leader.

Yearning to be taught by Jesus v.6 *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

What is more, they thirst for more. One speaker recently told me that our future is determined by the books we read and the people we call friends. In a world filled with self-proclaimed experts, people who read the Bible and spend time with Jesus are blessed. They are blessed because the Bible has the answers we need for daily life. Do you know how to build strong relationships? The Bible will tell you. Do you know how to have lasting success and great values? The Bible is filled with those answers as well.

Blessed are those who thirst for more because Jesus will answer them honestly. He will take time to sit down with them in Bible classes and worship. They will ask their questions in prayer, and as they read the Bible and the Holy Spirit will direct them to a passage or to a thought from something they read. They will have an advantage that the world cannot match. In this information age, we drown in destructive information. Christians who thirst for the Lord know that everything in this Bible is accurate and trustworthy. They have answers that others can only guess at.

Live like Jesus

Loving as we have been loved v.7 *Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*

Then Jesus looks at his disciples seated in front of him. Blessed are those who live out the things they have learned from God's word and Jesus. It is not enough to know the truth. You have to live it if that truth is going to free you. You have to love as Jesus has loved you. You have received the greatest gift that the world has ever seen. The Lord himself took on human form and died on the cross for you. He did so that you might be forgiven. He did it so that you might receive his mercy and freedom from guilt.

Now go out and give that mercy to others. Forgive when people hurt you. Do not start the cycle of revenge. Don't gossip or blame people. Broke people live that way as they seek to give value to themselves by devaluing others. If you live out the love of God, people will see God in you, and you will see a deeper picture of what God is like. So live like God and learn the joy of being loving and forgiving. See how wonderful it is to be part of God's kingdom and live in his wisdom instead of living like everyone else.

Serving even if we pay the price v.9 *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.*

Just don't expect that everyone will be as thrilled with the new you as you are with it. Oddly those who are sons and daughters of God and who live peaceful and merciful lives are often persecuted by others. Our society is not a friend to God or his people. They expect us to be nasty and hateful like them, and they struggle when they see someone who is a servant caring about others. They will make fun of us and stand in our way, trying to make us vile like them. They will be tools of Satan as he tries to keep his control of the world and its attitudes.

Yet, don't let the world rob you of your joy and new life. Instead, be a blessing to others as you bring peace and love to the world. Smile at the attendant at the local Subway restaurant. Listen when she tells you that her grandmother is dying. Offer her the peace and love that only come from God. Be the righteous servant that changes your world one day and one person at a time. Those who live out the love of the Lord as servants will be a ray of sunshine in a dark world. They will be a blessing and will be called blessed by our Lord and by others whose lives they touch.

Those who are right with God and with themselves will survive v.12 *Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven,*

It was not easy living in the Roman world of Jesus' day. People were facing persecution, low wages, and a lot of abuse. Yet, those who came to Jesus were blessed. He gave them answers to their questions and a way to survive in a cruel world. Those who thirst for Jesus and live out his mercy will find that they will survive in a cruel world as well. They will have the answers that only Jesus can give. He will provide them with a path through the pain and suffering of the world. They will overcome the hurts of life and has his hope.

They will not only hear his words but also follow him, trusting that what he says is true. They will be kind when the world is nasty. They will be merciful in a world of revenge. They will love when the world tells us to hate. They will be different, and it will work. Time and time again, there has been a remnant in tough times. A remnant came out of Babylon, and a remnant came through the destruction of Jerusalem. Blessed are those who look to Jesus and live like Jesus. They will be the remnant no matter how hard things get, for Jesus has the answers, and they follow Him. Amen.

2 Be prepared

Luke 17:20-30

Big Idea: Christ is all the preparation we need

Luke 17:20-30 ²⁰ Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, ²¹ nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you." ²² Then he said to his disciples, "The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. ²³ Men will tell you, 'There he is!' or 'Here he is!' Do not go running off after them. ²⁴ For the Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other. ²⁵ But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. ²⁶ "Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. ²⁷ People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all. ²⁸ "It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. ²⁹ But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. ³⁰ "It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed.

Boy scouts and Christians should be prepared.

I am ready

I have never been a boy scout, but I have been camping for most of my life. I have preparedness down to a science. I have a complete first aid kit. I have ropes and tarps. I have lights, stoves and extra batteries, and propane. Most of all, I have duct tape. The wonder tape can fix a camper when a squirrel chews through your screen. It can tow a trailer down an interstate highway. It can fix a shoe whose sole has split from the top. I never go camping without it. Unfortunately, stuff happens, and you often don't have time to buy it when you need it.

I am also ready as a Christian. I have my bible study and prayer life in place. I have let the Lord spend years shaping my values. I share those values with my wife and children so that we all take time to pray and to be in weekly worship and study. God is part of our life, so we are ready for anything. And I know something is coming. Murphy's Law says a crisis is coming in our lives, whether it is health issues, job issues, or issues with the car or house. Who knows what the future will bring, especially now with the transitions in health care, retirement, and life in general? I am scared, but I am ready.

Are you ready? Murphy comes, and you know it.

The question for this morning is – "are you ready?" Unfortunately, you are not immune to the crisis of life. We have seen people in the congregation who have lost jobs or health. We have seen people with struggles resulting from family members being sick or stupid in their lives. How close are you to Jesus and his help right now? Would you know where to find Jesus to help you or what He is willing to do? Would you have your prayer habit going so that you could plug in your problem and ask him what to do?

Would your family be a comfort or a nuisance if a crisis came tomorrow? Will they sit down with you and pray? Will they remind you of God's promises? Or will your family run around and scream at you to do something and keep you from praying or trusting in Jesus? Survival, when an emergency comes, will be about being prepared. It is about being prepared yourself and having a family that is ready enough so that they are a blessing and not making things worse. It will be about having your spiritual duct tape ready.

Simple lessons about being prepared

A. It is all about Jesus. v.21 *nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is among you.*

For three years, Jesus has been preaching, teaching, and healing up and down the countryside. Now as he is on his way to the cross, the Pharisees ask him when the kingdom of God will come. Why he didn't

just slap them, I will never know. The kingdom has come. Jesus is here. Can't they see that? I shouldn't be surprised. The Lord has been present in America for over 230 years, and we still have people asking how we get out of a crisis. Maybe things would be better if we had better schools and more welfare. Perhaps we would be ready if we had better technology and scientific advances.

I want to shout, "It is all about Jesus!" It is all about having a relationship with him and not with your gadgets and programs. Has technology or overwhelming social programs changed the fundamental problems of our world? Have we taken away the risk of cancer, job loss, or poverty? Jesus is the answer. No one else knows what the future will bring. No one else has the power and resources to help you or me through the crisis that we know will come into our life. It is all about Jesus, and those who don't have Jesus will be toast.

B. It is universal. There is no other answer v.24 *For the Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other.*

Yes, I know people will tell you that Jesus may work for you, but they have their own answers. The Pharisees of Jesus' day thought they had it all figured out. Then they got the Romans mad, and in 70 AD, their temple was destroyed, the Jews were massacred, and their world crumbled. I guess that they didn't have the correct answer. Jesus says that the coming of the Son of man will be like lightning. When it flashes, everyone will see it. Everyone will be affected by it. Those who have Jesus will be saved. Those who do not have Jesus will not be saved. I know that is not politically correct, but the truth can be challenging.

People want to think government and technology are the answers. Yet, if the economy fell apart like the great depression, what can the government do now that we are trillions in debt? If the bottom falls out of your life, what will your smartphone or any other technology do for you? Prayer helps. Medical studies have proven it. Christians know it as well. Tapping into the power and peace of Jesus will help in any crisis. The trouble is that most Christians don't use prayer enough to know how to use it when problems come. They don't know their bibles well enough to find the wisdom and help they need.

C. It is sudden. There is no second chance v.27 *People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all.*

And when crisis comes, there may not be a chance to learn how to connect with Jesus. The flood came, and everyone was in party mode. Sodom had forgotten God, so when the fire and brimstone came, the city was toast. There was no second chance for either group who had left God out of life. Face it; there is not always a pause in life where you get a chance to figure things out. If you are not ready when the crisis comes, it will flatten you, and you may or may not get an opportunity to develop a prayer life or start looking in the Bible for answers.

Most of the people I have known in crisis are whiny messes. They are angry at God for somehow not exempting them from trouble and soon become their own worst enemy. They are surrounded by family members who also have not spent time with God and have no connection to Him. In the end, the crisis comes suddenly, and they start doing stuff to try to make it all better. Sadly, they do things that often make it worse and make it hard for God almighty to help them. Picture God trying to help them out of the hole as they keep digging it deeper, and you know what I mean.

On being prepared

As long as you are alive, there is time to start preparing

The good news is that as long as you are alive and the last day has not yet come, there is still time to start being prepared. If you want to be ready when crisis comes, you start building your relationship with the Lord now. Start simple and get the hang of it so you have a foundation to build on. Make it your goal to take one of the devotional books at church and start having a simple fifteen minutes with God each day.

Read for five to seven minutes and pray for about the same amount of time. Satan will try to stop you, but you keep going. You want to build a habit that will connect you to the Lord when times are tough.

Pray about your family and encourage them. Put your faith into action so they can see what a difference it makes for you. If you have small children, start having devotions at night so that you connect them with the Lord. Please bring them to Sunday school so they can connect with Jesus as well. If your family is older, talk about what your faith is doing in your life. Pray at the dinner table. You don't want to get them angry, but it may be time you get upset when they try to silence your words about the Lord. Figure out some way to show Jesus and start.

Picture if the crisis came and you were ready

Being prepared makes all the difference. For example, let's say that you find out you have cancer. If your bible pipeline and prayer pipeline are in place, you will have a connection to the Lord that lets you cry out to him for help, and that has a place for you to receive wisdom and answers. Your family will pray with you and ask for help from the Lord. They will not be running around like chickens without a head annoying you. Instead, they will be a comfort to you as they channel the Lord's love and blessings to you.

The treatments will proceed, and your Bible will be at your side. You will be a blessing to others who have cancer. You will pray with them and share with them how your Lord is helping you through things one step at a time. Your worry level will be down, and a cool head will prevail. The crisis will come, and those connected to Jesus will survive and thrive. They know that their savior has everything in hand, and they can trust and follow him because they are ready. Just know that there is only one thing you need in a crisis, and that is a duct tape called Jesus. Amen.

3 Be Faithful **Luke 19:11-27**

Big idea: Faithfulness means taking risks for Jesus

Luke 19:11-27 ¹¹ While they were listening to this, he went on to tell them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once. ¹² He said: "A man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return. ¹³ So he called ten of his servants and gave them ten minas. 'Put this money to work,' he said, 'until I come back.' ¹⁴ "But his subjects hated him and sent a delegation after him to say, 'We don't want this man to be our king.' ¹⁵ "He was made king, however, and returned home. Then he sent for the servants to whom he had given the money, in order to find out what they had gained with it. ¹⁶ "The first one came and said, 'Sir, your mina has earned ten more.' ¹⁷ "'Well done, my good servant!' his master replied. 'Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities.' ¹⁸ "The second came and said, 'Sir, your mina has earned five more.' ¹⁹ "His master answered, 'You take charge of five cities.' ²⁰ "Then another servant came and said, 'Sir, here is your mina; I have kept it laid away in a piece of cloth. ²¹ I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man. You take out what you did not put in and reap what you did not sow.' ²² "His master replied, 'I will judge you by your own words, you wicked servant! You knew, did you, that I am a hard man, taking out what I did not put in, and reaping what I did not sow? ²³ Why then didn't you put my money on deposit, so that when I came back, I could have collected it with interest?' ²⁴ "Then he said to those standing by, 'Take his mina away from him and give it to the one who has ten minas.' ²⁵ "'Sir,' they said, 'he already has ten!' ²⁶ "He replied, 'I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away. ²⁷ But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them--bring them here and kill them in front of me.'"

Faithfulness to your values means taking risks

The risks of vacations

I must be crazy, but I love to go on camping vacations. But I must admit that traveling across the country with an RV can be dangerous. We have hit straight winds and violent storms on more than one occasion. In addition, we have almost been in an accident twice. So it is more complicated to camp than you would think. Yet it connects with things that are so important to me. I love having two weeks where there are no interruptions, and I can give my family my undivided attention. You can pour yourself into your kids and get to know them in a way that life at home doesn't provide.

There is nothing like waking up in the morning to see the mountains or a gentle stream by your campsite. You feel alive in a new way and learn so many incredible things about America and yourself as you camp. Camping is about my values as a person. Joan and I have been willing to take risks and make sacrifices to stay faithful to those values. It has been worth every chance that we have taken. I am glad that God has given me the opportunity and that he goes with us when we camp to keep us safe.

The risks of life

I am sure you all have stories of risk to talk about. That is because so many things that we think are important require risk. You took a chance when you went to college or took a new job. You did it because you felt it was the way to get ahead. Many of you had children. Now there is a risk. Yet, you did it because it was important to you to have this legacy and these wonderful, if sometimes troublesome, people in your lives. You may have taken other risks as well in life, all because they match your core values.

So what risks have you taken because of your faith? Have you ever noticed that churches and Christians who seek safety often end up with nothing? They huddle when things get tough, put faith on the back burner, and find it gone when they need it in the trying days ahead. Let's face it. Jesus was a risk-taker. He gave up everything to come to earth to die on the cross for us. He wants his church to be faithful

to him and take risks as well. Today we will see how faithfulness in the last days means taking a risk. You have to trust him to make things work out.

Faithfulness to the gospel means taking risks.

God calls us to take risks for the gospel v. 13 *So he called ten of his servants and gave them ten minas. 'Put this money to work,' he said, 'until I come back.'*

The task is simple. The Lord calls us to put the gospel to work. He has left to go into the heavens, having earned this salvation with his death and resurrection from the cross, and now he wants us to put it to use. We all have the same gospel and many of the same opportunities. Yet to share the gospel does take some risk. You may have to risk some of your finances as the congregation and as you try to share the gospel. It might be a project the church asks for money for or spending money to help a friend as you live and share the gospel.

It may mean risking your time putting door knockers on homes this afternoon or just taking time for a cup of coffee with a friend who needs someone to share a broken life with. Both mean risks, but both could bring back some blessings as we tell others about the love of Jesus for them in their trials. We will be faithful because we believe in this gospel. We genuinely believe that people are better off if they have Jesus in their lives. We care about them so much that we are willing to take the risks of sharing the message. Being faithful to Jesus is being devoted to his message. That takes risk.

Those who take risks will see the rewards v. 17 *"Well done, my good servant!" his master replied. 'Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities.'*

Yet, there are rewards as well. Those who use the gift will be rewarded with more work and opportunities. Notice how the first two servants are rewarded by being given a larger share of the ministry and all the resources they need to do that work. If you share your faith with others who are struggling, you will find that people with problems will seek you out for the message that Jesus has. Our Lord will give you the time and words you need to share his message. It may not always be easy, but Jesus will help you touch even more lives.

Churches that take risks will find that people will want them to take on new ministries. They will be asked to do ministries in areas in which they have never worked before. It will mean using more resources and time, but God will provide what is needed to get the critical work done. God will provide because he wants the work done and done well. He is the master of all things and will reward people and churches that are faithful to the ministry he has given them. The Lord will provide the resources they need and manage the risk they must take. He wants them to succeed.

Those who refuse the risks will lose what they have v.24 *"Then he said to those standing by, 'Take his mina away from him and give it to the one who has ten minas.'*

Yet, not all of the servants were willing to take risks. One of the servants did not obey the master and put the money to work. He returns the money to the master in pristine condition and promptly finds that it is taken away. He took no risk and lost everything. That shouldn't surprise us. The master wanted results. Isn't a pitcher who can't strike out the other side out sent to the dugout? Doesn't the boss take away a project from someone who doesn't get it done on time? If you don't produce in life, you often lose the opportunities you have been given.

That is true in the church as well. People need to use the gifts that the Lord has given them to avoid losing them. Talents like music fade away if you don't use them. Money grows tight for those who hoard it for themselves. Why should God bless those who don't help others? Churches that play it safe and only try to keep things running are often the first to disappear from the face of the earth. They try to cut the budget here and there, so people don't have to trust the Lord and give more. Soon there is nothing left to cut. God takes back his resources if people don't use them.

Faithfulness means taking risks for the Lord.

You can badmouth the Lord or trust him v. 21 *I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man. You take out what you did not put in and reap what you did not sow.'*

Have you noticed that it seems like the last days are coming. God has given us the responsibility of bringing the gospel to a world around us that is hurting and needs him. He has given us a precious message that can change lives and help people. You have to believe that. Yet, too many people badmouth the world and make excuses like the third servant. Listen to some in the church who meet together and find all kinds of reasons why the church can't grow. They have become comfortable with the ways of the church and don't want to take risks.

You have to trust the Lord enough to take risks. Let us admit that there will be times we do things wrong. There will be times when we will fail. That is OK. God is OK with that because we went out and tried. We trust the Lord to manage the risks and make more things work than fail. The third servant in the text badmouths the master. He shows he has no love for the master or the task at hand. No wonder he fails. Every person and church has a choice in the challenging days ahead. You either moan and groan about how tough it is or you trust the Lord and take risks. You know the result of each.

What if we were to take a risk with our new resources?

The tendency of churches when they are under siege is to batten down the hatches and try to survive the evil around them. It rarely works. Jesus has a different way. He says to go out and take risks. Our Lord tells us to trust him and to make mistakes. He says get out and do it, and he will cover our backs. When a church has good fortune, I want to suggest one way we can take a risk. What if we gave God a tithe of any memorial or other gift we receive and then spent half the rest on risky ministries to spread the gospel? That would be a tidy sum each month on something to help members or reach the lost.

We could spend it on children's programs done well. We could spend it on projects in the community. We could spend it on helping members in need. It isn't our money anyway. We lose nothing if we spend the money on gospel projects that God dropped down from the sky. Think about what would happen if we spent \$200 a month for the next two or five years on the gospel? What would the church look like? What would our community look like if you spent \$20,000 of someone else's money over the next five years on gospel projects? I smile when I think of it, and I bet God does, too. He likes it when his faithful people take risks for Him.

4 Be diligent **Luke 12:42-48**

Big idea: *Do God's tasks and make the world better*

Luke 12:42-48 ⁴² The Lord answered, "Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? ⁴³ It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. ⁴⁴ I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. ⁴⁵ But suppose the servant says to himself, 'My master is taking a long time in coming,' and he then begins to beat the menservants and maidservants and to eat and drink and get drunk. ⁴⁶ The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers. ⁴⁷ "That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. ⁴⁸ But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

There is a reason for diligence

I get tired of making sure everything is going well

There are days that I have had it with perseverance. There is always a long list of things that I am supposed to make sure work right around the house and in my life. Around the house, it is, did you replace the furnace filter and the smoke alarm batteries? Did you clean out the leaves from the gutters or the stairwell drain? Health-wise, you need to go to the dentist, get your blood pressure checked, or get a check-up because you are old. It all gets to me. The older I get, have more things that are supposed to be checked.

Maybe, I will go out in the camper and find a quiet stream to sit by and let all this diligence go by. But, of course, before I leave, I need to check the tires, the camper lights, and the propane. So, on second thought, maybe we should all stay home. Yet, in the back of my mind, I know why you have to have all this due diligence. My mother taught me that a stitch in time saves nine. A clean filter keeps the furnace running well. A clean gutter keeps the water from running into the house. There is a reason for all this stuff.

The reality of not having diligence

In our busy lives, I am sure that some of you have that feeling of being overwhelmed as well. However, we have to balance that out with the consequences that often come when we neglect some maintenance for our homes or lives. For you, know that if you don't take the time it takes to clean a drain or pull leaves from the gutter, you will have hours of extra work cleaning up a mess. You might also have hundreds or thousands of dollars of damage that could have been prevented. It is just hard to get it all done.

That makes this message hard for me. I want to talk to you about being diligent with our faith in these last days. God has given all of us in the church the task of bringing his power and gospel into the world. It takes time and effort, and that has been hard for us. Yet, as we look at the large number of youth and the majority of adults who have no desire for God, we realize that we are facing the consequences of not cleaning spiritual gutters. Our world will pay a high price because the church has not been diligent. Yet, there is time to turn the tide.

God calls us to be diligent.

He has given us a task that will change the world v. 42 *The Lord answered, "Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time?"*

In the parable, the master has left the servant in charge of the household. He is to ensure that the others are well-fed and that the work is done. The master has given him responsibility and the authority to get the task done. The fate of the household is in his hands. The church and its members have been given the task of feeding and caring for the world. We are to provide people with the spiritual food of the Bible so that they have the gift of salvation and the benefit of the Lord's blessings in their life.

We have been given the task of caring for the weak and our children. We are to bring them closer to the Lord and to care for their needs. We are to educate our children so that they know what Jesus can do in their lives and that they love him in return. The Lord has given us gospel power and all the talents and resources we need to complete the task. We can see the miracles that are possible when the church does this task. Lives are changed, and things get better. God wants people spiritually fed and cared for.

Our temptation is to get lazy when it takes too long v.45 *But suppose the servant says to himself, 'My master is taking a long time in coming,' and he then begins to beat the menservants and maidservants and to eat and drink and get drunk.*

Yet, the master in the parable is delayed and takes a while to get back. The servant starts growing tired of caring for others. He slowly starts abusing the workers around him. He starts to steal from the food of others and cares only for himself. Life deteriorates for the servant and all those in the household. It is easy for all of us in the church to get lazy as well. Life is busy, and the Lord seems like he is taking a long time to return. Ask a New Testament person, and they would have believed they would have seen the return of Jesus in their lifetime. Ask a Christian today, and few think it will happen in the next 500 years.

Like the dirty furnace filter, the tasks of the faithful Christian get put on the back burner. There is always time later to get active in worship or Bible class. There is always time later to help the neighbor next door who needs help or needs to know about Jesus. Yet, once the believer starts thinking that Jesus is not coming back, his life begins to deteriorate. Our relationships with others depend on our relationship with the Lord. Anger, jealousy, and loneliness become more prevalent. The world around us starts falling apart because it has forgotten Jesus, and we have failed to remind them.

We will pay the penalty of shattered lives if the work is not done v.46 *The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.*

The servant pays the price for his laziness. The master will come and see how neglected his household is, and he will know who to blame. He will punish the servant severely because he has shattered the lives of so many others. It even says that the master will physically cut him to pieces. God will judge his people who have not been diligent with their responsibility. They will pay for this laziness with shattered lives. As they slip away from the love of the Lord, they will start having less love for others. Relationships will slowly decay. Life will be filled with hassles instead of love.

They will watch the world around them become a less friendly place. Fewer and fewer people around us live with Christian values. More people grab what they can get in life because they don't know God. The world becomes a hostile place when Christians stop sharing their faith and have fewer people around them believe in the Lord. The text says that judgment will come, and it will be harder on Christians than non-Christians. Part of that is simply that those who have known what life can be when everyone has God's love will be harder hit when they see what the world has become without it. The non-Christian doesn't know what they are missing. We Christians do.

You can change the world

To be diligent, we need to do the work

There still is time to change the world or at least a portion of it. The solution is for the church to do the tasks that the Lord has given it. Others are depending on the church for spiritual food at a time when they are eating the garbage of the secular media and so many self-proclaimed wise men. Just as putting in

the filter keeps the furnace running and the house warm for all, sharing the gospel will change the atmosphere around our communities and the world. It will warm up the culture around us and make things more pleasant for all.

People in our world seem to lack hope. Families and other relationships are broken in our society in a big way. We try to overcome those things by making friends on Facebook and twittering good things that are happening, but it is not the same. God wants us to spread his hope of salvation and the hope of having a God who can make life better. God wants us to spread his love so that people learn to forgive and be patient with one another. God wants us to change the world by making people's lives better as people get to know him. It is time to do the work that the church was meant to do.

We have the opportunity of improving the world.

What I mean is this. Just think of how the world would be different around us if the church and its members took this role seriously. What change would there be if even 25 or 30% of our children had strong faith instead of the current 10%? How would that make the world more patient? What if people saw the church as a place where those who came to it were cared for and loved? What if people felt the love of Jesus as we taught people to love instead of hate? Think of what the world would be like if 40% were active Christians and lived out the love of Jesus in their lives.

It was the vision of the Lord that his church would be a leavening agent in the world. They would bring the joy of salvation to people and change their attitudes so that they were more loving and patient. They would combat evil not by destroying people but by making them into good people through God's power. The future of the world is in our hands. God has put it there and given us both the resources and the authority to change that world with the gospel message. The world can continue to go downhill, or God's people can sow the seeds of his love and change the world they live in.