

Day 11
Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You.
"By grace you have been saved." -Ephesians 2:8

We are saved by grace. Start to finish. Beginning to end.

Before and after?

Yes, before and after!

We are saved by grace before and after a momentous life event.

There are experiences in this life that shape us. After living through them we are sure that we have learned our lesson. We promise ourselves that our life has changed. That we are a changed person. Our priorities and perspective are now in the right place.

We are certain we will not make any more mistakes. But even after, we make mistakes!

You would think Peter would have learned his lesson. After that defining life moment when he was walking on water and then drowning in the sea, you would think he would never deny Jesus. After denying Jesus you would think he would welcome the Gentiles.

After Noah lived through the Flood you think he would faithfully follow God. But turn the page and you find him in a drunken stupor.

Abraham pawns off his wife to save his own neck. You think he would have learned his lesson, but he does it again.

After the defining moment of being converted on the road to Damascus, Paul says in Romans, "The good I want to do I don't do, the evil I don't want to do I do."

Take comfort in knowing and believing that your relationship with the Lord is defined by grace, not perfecting life lessons after defining moments.

Grace upon grace is the gift of Christ Jesus. Not cheap grace. A costly grace. An expensive cross.

You are not worthy, but Jesus is for you.

Yes, we should have learned our lesson by now. Yes, after living through certain defining moments in life, you would think we would get our acts together.

But you are not saved by lessons learned. You are saved by grace.

You were saved by grace before learning your lesson and you are saved by grace after learning your lesson and you are saved by grace even when you failed to learn your lesson.

Cherish this gift of grace.

+To God be the glory!

Day 12

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him." -Romans 8:28.

When one door closes another opens.

The U.S. Navy suspended the blimp program in the 1950's. In 1955, the first live broadcast from an aircraft occurred from the Goodyear Blimp Enterprise during NBC's coverage of the Rose Bowl. In 1960, the blimp would fly again providing breath taking aerial views of the 1960 Orange Bowl. And the blimp has been flying ever since. It's a fixture covering major sporting events like football, baseball, golf, horseracing and NASCAR.

Why? It gives the viewer a whole new perspective. A big picture. From 1,000 feet above you can see the event from a bird's eye view. Showcasing the pageantry of the event. The scope and size. The environment.

Let's talk big picture. Interesting?

The Lord sees the big picture of your life. While we see only from sea level, He sees from heaven and for heaven.

Events in life are often a mystery to us. No surprise here. The apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13:12, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror, then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully."

So we walk by faith, not by sight. Trusting there is a camera angle from high above that makes 'Godly' sense to the events of our life. As Joseph confessed to his suffering of being sold off into slavery in Egypt by his brothers, "what man intended as harm, God used for good."

"We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him."

It can be a bitter pill to swallow. But He invites us to His table to eat and drink His body and blood to help wash it down. To strengthen and sustain faith unto life everlasting.

You might not be able to explain the sufferings, setbacks and sickness in this life. I know I can't. But we can hold on to His promises. And trust that all things work to the good for those who love Him.

From the vantage point at the foot of the cross, it seemed as if all was lost when Jesus died. On Easter, when He rises we see a whole new perspective. We see it all worked out for the good. Our God sees the big picture of life. He sees the big picture of your life.

+To God be the glory!

Day 13

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You

*"Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have summoned you by name. You are mine."
-Isaiah 43:1*

I have a last name that most people cannot pronounce. Most people cannot spell. The people that can say and spell Ahlemeyer, correctly, are the people who truly know me. There is much in a name. There is much in your name!

Nothing scares a pastor more than an usher handing him a last minute prayer request with a name on the card that he doesn't know how to pronounce! Why? Mispronouncing a name easily offends people.

I have no proof or evidence. The following is just anecdotally. But I would place a bet on my gut instinct. Instinct?

In two decades of parish ministry, the majority of the names of visitors I remembered joined the church. The majority of the names of visitors I forgot did not join the church.

Why? There is much in a name.

In Holy Baptism, God names us. He names you to be His own. He names you "Christian." In Lutheranism, the focus of baptism is God always promising to be with us. In ICU this was a tremendous comfort to me and comforts me still, when I look back and as I look forward to the future.

Most of the time in ICU I didn't really know what was going on. Sedated. Unconscious. Asleep. Blurred. Confused.

When I got out of the hospital I finally learned about half of the things that happened to me. Even though I couldn't recite the Creed, or say the Lord's Prayer, or answer a question for Bible Jeopardy - the Lord was always with me.

Dear Christian, the Lord is always with you. And your loved one in Christ.

Fearing alzheimers and dementia? The Lord is with you. He knows you by name!
Fearing surgery and anaesthesia? The Lord is with you. He knows you by name.
Fearing sleeping at night? The Lord is with you. He knows you by name.
Fearing the vulnerabilities of this life? The Lord is with you. He knows you by name.

In college, I had the opportunity to meet Captain Jim Lovell, astronaut aboard Apollo 13. Perhaps, you have seen the movie? If not, this weekend you should watch it. Tom Hanks plays the role of Jim Lovell in Apollo 13.

There is a great scene when Jim Lovell, from space, looks back at the earth. He can cover the earth with his thumbnail. How insignificant and small we can feel as creatures on this earth compared to the grandeur of the universe! This earth is just a speck compared to the heavenly heavens.

Sometimes you can feel forgotten, small, and insignificant. Not a name, but just a number. And to be honest with you, unfortunately, even those nearest and dearest to us will forget us in one way or the other.

But the Lord knows you by name. He is the one who will be with you always to the very end of the age. He never forgets His own.

The Lord knows all of creation inside and out. For those who have not been reconciled to Him, that is a frightening thing, for it means that their sins are known and being counted for the day of judgment. Repent and believe! For those who do know Christ, however, our Lord's intimate knowledge of us is the most comforting truth imaginable. Because He knows us perfectly, He can help and sustain us perfectly.

"Fear not, I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name, you are mine."

Your name is spelled correctly in the Book of Life. On the Last Day, the Lord will stand over your resting place and call you forth from the grave - and when He pronounces your name He will say it correctly - and you will discover that He knows you better than you even know yourself!

+To God alone be the glory.

Day 14

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You

"Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...let us run with perseverance." - Hebrews 12:1

Just before I was intubated a stranger appeared in my room. She told us she worked in the hospital. She had no connection to me. Except earlier during the Covid pandemic she was in the exact same position I was facing. She was intubated with Covid pneumonia and eventually recovered. She stayed only for a moment. She just wanted to give me some hope. She wanted me to know that she made it through; and if it was God's will that I too could survive.

It gave Jaki and me a measure of hope in that moment. (Ironically, the lady's name was Jackie - not sure how it is spelled).

Christians encouraging Christians. It probably took her no more than just a few moments to walk from her work station in the hospital to my room to share this message. But it meant the world to us!

The first few verses of Hebrews chapter 12 gives us the picture of an athletic contest in a great amphitheater. The "witnesses" are the fans in the stands, fellow Christians, cheering on those running the race. Not a sprint or a marathon. But Christians running the race of faith.

At times, you are the runner.

At times, you are the fan in the stands.

Maybe you can be the fan shouting out encouragement!

For example...

The Lord by His grace has gifted you with perseverance through unspeakable grief.

The Lord by His grace has gifted you with perseverance through an ugly divorce.

The Lord by His grace has gifted you with the perseverance to forgive the unforgivable.

The Lord by His grace has gifted you with perseverance to battle through cancer.

The Lord by His grace has gifted you with perseverance through financial hardship.

The Lord by His grace has gifted you with perseverance through religious persecution.

Cheer on your fellow brother and sister running the race. Share with them to fix their eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12:3) as they run the race.

Some will be tempted to drop out of the contest because of the hardship.

So cheer them on! Surround them with the promise of Christ - that He brings all things to completion.

Tell them how the Lord carried you to the finish line and how He will carry all of us to the end - which is really the beginning!

My personal thanks to the stranger who entered my hospital room on that day. For I remember the words of Hebrews 13:2, "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."

Remember, in Scripture the word "angel" means "messenger," not always the spiritual being. May you be an "angel," or messenger, for someone in the heat of competition. Cheering them on as they run the race of faith.

+To God be the glory!

Day 15

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You

"And when he finds it, he joyfully puts the sheep on his shoulders and goes home." -Luke 15:5-6

How happy will you be when you go home? I mean "home." Your Father's house. Your heavenly home.

I got a foretaste of this feast to come.

When?

When I came home from the hospital, I was filled with unspeakable joy. This letter might be short because there are no words to explain my emotion. The only way I could communicate my feelings? My joy? My happiness? Tears. And more tears. And even more tears.

A picture might be worth a thousand words. A tear might be worth a million words. Some might say I "bawled like a baby." Some might have called it the "ugly cry." Some, like King David, paint this picture, "you turned my wailing into dancing." I just sat on the couch and cried.

The joy of heaven awaits you. A homecoming where tears of sadness will be turned into tears of gladness. The best day of your life is right around the corner.

Heaven is the real deal.

It is not just some pie in the sky ecclesiastical doctrine dreamt up so that we can say everyone lives "happily ever after" like a fairy tale. It is not just given as a consolation prize to the weak and lowly to give some sort of faux hope. It is not, as some philosophers have described, the "opiate of the masses." It is not a carrot dangling before the faithful to keep them in line and in step with the institutional church. It is not a teaching where "everyone is a winner" so that no one's feelings are hurt in the end.

Heaven is home.

Paul looked to the joy before him and freely admitted he would rather go to his home in heaven than stick around here in this rental property we call earth.

Jesus promised the joy of heaven awaiting us makes all the suffering, setbacks, and sicknesses here on earth worth it in the very end.

Jesus ascended to heaven to prepare a place for you. I like the old translation in John 14. Not just a home or house. But a "mansion." And a room in that mansion is reserved for you.

Soon, very soon, Jesus will meet you with arms wide open, saying, "Welcome home, good and faithful servant."

+To God be the glory!