

Day 21

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You

*"So do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope."
- 1 Thessalonians 4:13*

Similarities. Differences.

Christians. Non-Christians.

How are Believers and Unbelievers similar?

At times...strikingly similar!

Both are seized with fear. Both get scared. Both get frustrated. Both have questions. Both are tempted. Both get down.

Both are human.

If you walked through ICU, you might observe and confirm the hypothesis above. If you peeked into the room of a Christian you might see tears. If you peeked into the room of a Non-Christian you might see tears. Both similar.

You can test this hypothesis outside of ICU as well. If you walk by the cemetery you will witness a Christian grieving. If you walk by the cemetery you will witness a Non-Christian grieving. Both similar.

So what is the difference?

Christians grieve with hope. Christians cry with hope.

Fear? Frustration? Failure? Hope!
Questions? Skepticism? Doubt? Hope!
The Christian is marked by hope.

Others? Hopelessness.

Or they hope in a hopeless cause.

After my time in ICU, I know that nothing in this world can give you hope in the face of death. A great hymn to look up and memorize is: "What is the World to Me."

Only Jesus brings hope.

People often say suffering causes us to question faith in God. I totally agree. It shakes you to the core. But it also causes you to question the false promises of this world!

In the end, only Jesus offers hope! What can fame or fortune offer? It's a good question with no good answer.

Only Jesus brings hope!

We are in the world, but not of the world. We are similar to the world, but totally different from the world.

Paul always has the right words at the right time: "Do not be conformed to the world, but transformed in Christ."

Only Jesus brings hope.

Add that one word, Jesus, to a similar sentence and the whole meaning drastically changes.

Yes, both grieve...yet one has hope.

You have hope!

+To God be the glory.

Day 22

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You

"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." - Romans 8:18

"It's all worth it in the end." From the lips of the manager at the De Beers' diamond mine in Kimberley, South Africa. Each day the miners blast away 16,000 tons of rock to bring up just a handful of diamonds. (story from "Faithful God" by Sinclair Ferguson)

16,000 tons of rock vs. Ounces of Diamonds.

Is it worth it?

When you are the one doing the heavy lifting you might wonder if it is all worth it in the end?

I'm not just talking about the heavy lifting for diamonds.

What about the weight of a chronic illness, the frustration of trying to mend a broken relationship, the fatigue of parenting, the pressure of household finances, or the burden to care for an aging parent?

What about faith in the face of suffering?

Honestly, sometimes it might seem easier to toss faith to the side. For example, if your spouse isn't too excited about church on Sunday morning, it is easier to play hooky. 'Discussing' whether to go to church on Saturday night might be a tough sell. Is it really worth it?

Jesus tells the story about a man who goes out and sells everything. All to purchase a field. But no ordinary field. A field where there is buried a great treasure.

We all question whether Jesus is worth it when we have to carry our cross. We all question whether Jesus is worth it when we have to bear our thorn in the flesh.

Paul asked the question. Here is Paul's answer: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

Sometimes it might seem like faith in Jesus is just pounding sand. Is it worth it?

Peter reminds us: "Lord, to whom shall we go? Only you have the words of eternal life."

Jesus vs. Sufferings?
Jesus wins every time.

+To God be the glory!

Day 23

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You

"Search the Scriptures, for they testify about me." -John 5:39

I will only speak from my experience. So, here it goes...

Friends I know who are not Christians all have one thing in common. They all know about a "version" of Jesus, but not the Jesus of Scripture.

Unfortunately, their understanding of Christ and Christianity comes from every source except **THE SOURCE**.

They have been presented a counterfeit Christ from Hollywood, academia, social media, a talking head on cable news who identifies as a Christian, a politician using Christianity as a voting block, a T.V. Evangelist who lives in a million dollar mansion, a bad experience from their childhood, a colorful uncle, and the list goes on and on.

I have a cure for these counterfeits.

Venture to a hospital and sit at the bedside of a pastor sharing the Word of God with a patient in ICU. Visit an orphanage and watch a missionary work day and night. Volunteer for a VBS and follow your DCE around all week. Watch a Christian man mentor another man at a local homeless shelter. Witness a Christian mom give counsel to an expecting teen at a community pregnancy center. Go to a Christian camp and shadow a young Christian who volunteered to be the big brother or big sister to a disabled individual.

Talk to these people and ask them who is Jesus?

The historical Jesus and those who follow Him call out the imposters of our age. And by the way, the versions of Jesus that we create and idolize in our own deceitful hearts. We are just as guilty. We are just as forgiven.

For when you encounter the Jesus of grace upon grace upon grace in Scripture, it is a beautiful thing. It frees you. No more debates and discussions. No more memes. No more bumper stickers.

God gave us Scripture not to bind us but free us to know Jesus. We know where to go to find the version of Jesus from heaven above to earth here below. Freedom! No more bondage to the confusion of counterfeits in our current age.

We discover a Jesus who is synonymous with an undeserved love, or grace.

Grace does not excuse the sinner. The common refrain of Hollywood. Grace does not condemn the sinner. Often found on social media. Grace doesn't play games with the sinner. Politics anyone...

Grace renews, refreshes, reconciles, and resurrects.

Go to a local LC-MS church and talk to a pastor. A pastor who shares the Jesus of Scripture with people like you. Those who live life laughing and crying like you.

Resist the urge to form your opinion of the church from CNN or Fox News. Resist the temptation of Hollywood depicting Christianity.

Talk to someone in the trenches who lives out the grace of Christ and ask them about the gospel?

It will be a Jesus that brings light into the darkness.

You don't have to go far in your search for Jesus. "Search the Scriptures" and seek out those who hold onto them in word and deed.

The mission field of our generation is not just talking about Jesus, but talking about what version others know and do they know the version of Scripture?

+To God be the glory.

Day 24

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You

"Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will exalt you." -James 4:10

We are by sin proficient at humiliating others. We are by sin deficient at genuine godly humility.

Covid should humble the world. Covid should humble America. Covid should humble me. Covid should humble you.

The origins of Covid? Hotly debated. Why does it hit some hard and not others? We are not completely sure. How long does natural immunity last, if it all? Will the vaccines work against future variants? There is data, but the data seems incomplete. Will you need a booster if you are already fully vaccinated? Some suggest it. Will there be adverse effects to the vaccine years from now? Hopefully not, but can anyone give you a complete guarantee? The list goes on and on and on...

Sometimes God allows an unsolved mystery.

Why?

So that we look to Him for the solution.

So that we take a knee. Not to protest the flag. But to admit we protest too much against Him. In our world we are too confident. Too confident in ourselves. Our thoughts. Our ways. Our lifestyles. Sometimes we can become too smart for our own good. We can outsmart our faith and start trusting ourselves for the answers. Thinking we have all the answers it leads us to a dark place. We begin to humiliate those who disagree with us. And while there is a speck in our neighbor's eye there is plank in our own.

Due to my illness I've had many knowledgeable people give me much advice. Much of it is not debatable. So much has been a blessing. I'm grateful beyond words. But there has also been, honestly, conflicting opinions. Many conflicting opinions.

If Covid teaches us something, it should be this: We are finite, the Lord is infinite.

The Lord calls science, technology, and medicine to care and cure. Thank God! What a gift! Thank a health care worker today.

But maybe the unsolved or partly solved riddles are given by God for a higher purpose.

Might the Lord be calling us to humble ourselves? To repent from our sin of overestimating our own intelligence in all matters of life.

Might the Lord be calling us to humbly walk with Him? To trust Him. To look to Him in faith. And the fruit of faith calls us to learn to differentiate knowledge and wisdom. Wisdom distinguishes itself from plain old knowledge by seeking to use facts and figures to the glory of God.

We too build our Towers of Babel. Politics, military, economy, academia, science, medicine, status - even theology.

So, the unsolved mysteries are used by God to point us to the ultimate solution.

The solution that Jesus saves!

Look to Him.

Walk humbly with Him and He will exalt you.

+To God be the glory!

Day 25

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You.

"Let us run with endurance the race set out for us." - Hebrews 12:1

Did you see the Olympic marathon?

A man won the race who never trained. He just showed up. He even set an Olympic record. In fact, he even destroyed the world record. It was surreal!

I say it was surreal because it wasn't real. It never happened. I just made it up to make a point. We know no one can just show up and run a marathon.

You need training. Training to build up endurance.

A friend of mine who runs told me it takes at least 6 months of dedicated training to go from couch potato to marathon runner.

The author of Hebrews tells us the race of faith will require "endurance."

As Christians we don't run the trail or hop on the treadmill to build endurance. It's not about being in the gym. It's about being in the Word.

For those that like math let's put it like this:

Spirit + Word + You = Endurance

For the non-math brains, the apostle Paul advised Timothy with these words: "All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and TRAINING in righteousness."

Right now life might be solid. You feel good about things. You feel like you are in a good place.

But is your house built on the sand or the rock?

There is no liability in building a house on the sand if the storms never come. But when the rain, wind, and waves start to pound against the house - if it is built on the sand will it stand? No.

But if it is built on the Rock - the Word and the Word made flesh - will it endure against the storms?

Yes.

Why go to church? Why attend Bible study? Why pray? Why read a devotional? Why listen to the podcast? Why talk about Christianity with friends and family?

Same reason the runner is out pounding the pavement! Building endurance for the race.

It might be a bright sunny morning this Sunday. Gorgeous weather. The fish are calling your name. The lake sounds so good. The pool has never felt better. The neighbor invited you golfing. The garden needs some work. Maybe church can wait a week...

So, why "train?"

Saint Paul: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it." - I Cor. 9:24

The storm clouds are always over the horizon in this fallen world. It is after all appointed for all men to die.

For Jesus said: "Do you not know that this night your life may be required of you!"

Build on grace so that your house stands.

Run in grace so that you endure to the finish line.

Live in grace so that you die in grace.

In times of hardship, it is not you or me who endure. It is the Word of God that dwells richly in us. For the Word of the Lord endures forever.

Come, Lord Jesus, come!

+To God be the glory!