

Day 26

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You

"Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven" -Matthew 5:12

A wonderful communicator of the Gospel, Alistair Begg, tells this story in his book, *Brave By Faith*:

"My brother once told me the story of a missionary who was returning to the United States, back in the days when overseas travel was only by ship. It happened that this missionary was on the same ship as an acclaimed national figure, and as the boat docked in New York, there were huge numbers of people gathered on the quay to greet this popular man with banners and signs. The photographers were lined up to take pictures of his return for all the newspapers. As the missionary scanned the faces on the quay, he realized that no one had come to welcome him. He had been gone for years, laboring in the cause of Christ, and no one had turned up to greet him."

There are times in life where we faithfully follow where the Lord leads. We follow through sickness, suffering, and setback. In those times we might receive no word of gratitude. In those days we might receive no token of thanksgiving.

Even when Jesus healed the lepers, He received little honor.

First, we need to humbly confess that God doesn't owe us anything. We deserve nothing good from His hand.

Second, we need to rejoice that God's hand is merciful and gracious. He mercifully doesn't give us what we deserve. He graciously gives us what we don't deserve.

He gives us a gracious reward for the sake of Christ and His cross.

What a gift!

But remember the reward is not of this world. For the kingdom of God is not of this world.

If we are looking for a reward in this world, our faith will be confused and compromised at best and forsaken at worst.

Store up treasure in heaven.

+To God be the glory.

Day 27

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You

"The Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you because the Lord your God loves you." -Deuteronomy 23:5

Christians clearly divide Law and Gospel. Never confuse Evil and Good. We distinguish between Light and Darkness.

And we don't pretend Curses are Blessings and Blessings are Curses.

War, famine, and poverty are curses. So is sickness. Period. Full stop!

But we also believe that the Lord can work a blessing out of a curse. Sometimes, I hear people call them a "backdoor blessing." These are blessings that come to us in an unexpected way.

Jokingly, because of my illness, I'm at least finally back to the weight on my driver's license. I've lost a few pounds to say the least. There is a bin of old clothes in my closet that I can finally wear again. Although, I don't recommend the ICU Diet Plan. Stick with Keto!

So, I guess, this is an example of a blessing out of a curse. (Solomon tells us there is a time to cry and laugh. As Christians there are appropriate times where we can even laugh at hardships around us because we can live in the promises before us.)

All kidding aside we can see God at work in our lives. I can see where God used my hardship and uses my continued hardships to refine me. To even graciously kill more of my Old Adam that wants to rear his ugly head. I could tell you examples. But more importantly, maybe you have a story to tell...

What curse has God used as a blessing in your life? Thank Him.

This isn't easy to do. Or to live through. This whole blessings out of curses business is a test of faith. Faith is never easy. Reason why we "cannot believe by our own reason and strength," as the Catechism reminds us.

But blessings are still blessings. And blessings are to be received with thanksgiving no matter how they are delivered. It doesn't make the curse less painful. It doesn't ignore the pain. It doesn't call the curse a blessing. It doesn't mean you have to be a Super Christian.

It means that you rejoice in believing that God is bigger than these curses. His love is greater than these curses. His blessing will deliver us from these curses - either in time or certainly in eternity.

It means that we can repent and believe and miraculously stand as a new creation in this old creation.

I think there will be so many "wonderful surprises" in heaven. One of those? We will see that events in this life that we wish never happened to us will be unveiled as a means that God used to call us closer to Him. Not that He caused it, but that He used it in His wise providence because He loves you.

Don't take my word for it, but take His Word for it.

"The Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you because the Lord your God loves you." -Deuteronomy 23:5

+To God be the glory!

Day 28

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You

"Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." -Colossians 3:2

Guys. Remember when your wife told you she was pregnant and expecting?

Ladies. Remember when you held your baby in your arms for the very first time?

Everything changed!

It's amazing how becoming a parent changed your life and your perspective on life!

Before kids...

You could stay out late on Friday.

You could sleep in on Saturday.

You could drive to church on Sunday in your foreign sportscar. But that all changed. The toy was traded in for the mini-van.

Not only what you drove changed, but how you drove changed. I remember the first time I drove with our firstborn in the car. I think I drove 25 mph in a 45 mph zone. When scooters passed me on the parkway I knew there was a problem!

The change? You no longer lived for yourself.

You lived for something more and it changed what you did everyday. Where the rubber met the road, in the most practical ways, in light of being a parent you changed.

In light of being a Christian you changed. You live for something more and it changes what you do everyday. The eternal perspective of Christianity is the most practical change you will ever experience here on earth.

However, one of the common complaints I hear about Christianity is that it is too focused on the eternal and not relevant to our lives here on earth.

Resurrection and reunion? Good stuff! Heaven? Great!

But what about today? What about tomorrow?

Well, the focus on the eternal is actually what gives relevance, meaning and purpose to the earthly!

For example, death here on earth has no meaning if there is no eternal life. But if there is eternal life your death takes on a new meaning.

Without the eternal your possessions are destined to rot and rust. But if there is eternal life your possessions can be used here on earth for the purpose of everlasting value.

Without the eternal your riches have limited buying power. But if there is eternal life you can invest in the mission of the church that reaps eternal rewards.

Without the eternal mankind is left to "invent" its own origin, purpose, meaning, and destiny - with no coherent worldview. But if there is the eternal your biggest questions in life have answers.

Being a parent changes your perspective on everyday life.

Being a Christian changes your perspective on everyday life.

Even suffering and sickness can be seen in a new light. The Light of Christ.

Put it to the test! Your worries? Your fears? Your disappointments? Your time?
How do they change in light of eternity?

To find the answers stop searching the kingdom of this world. But seek first the kingdom of God and all these things shall be added to you.

The earthly questions are not answered by the earthly. The earthly questions are answered by the eternal.

+To God be the glory.

Day 29

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You

"Yet in my own flesh I shall see God. -Job 19:26

The growth of the early Christian Church was astonishing. Why did it grow so fast? How did it grow so quickly?

One answer is actually connected to sickness, suffering, death and eternal life.

The Greek philosophical traditions left a bad taste in the mouth of the people. Specifically the popular Stoic teachings.

Yes, the Greeks believed in eternal life. But life everlasting was anonymous and impersonal. Meaning this...when you died you just blended in as a fragment of the cosmos.

Christianity in every age offers a better tomorrow.

Scripture promises our individual selves are saved. Your personality will be sustained, beautified, and perfected. You will be you. You will be resurrected. In your own flesh. Read Job 19! And joined with Christ and all the company of heaven.

This promise was more satisfactory than the impersonal afterlife of the so called Greek wisdom of the age.

Because of the resurrection the average Christian faced sickness and suffering with hope. Unlike the hopelessness of the ancients.

There is tremendous irony in this conversation. In the modern world...evil, pain, suffering and death are often believed to be a liability for people coming to Christ. Our Achilles heel. If the topic of suffering comes up we are often left tongue tied.

In the world of the early church, all of these so called liabilities were actually the strengths of the church.

Early Christian writers like Ambrose, Cyprian, and later Augustine spoke about how Christians faced "suffering better" and "died better." This was something tangible that neighbors could see and experience. It was demonstrative evidence that the Gospel was superior to sophistry. Tim Keller in his book on suffering puts it like this concerning Christianity: "Why were Christians so different? It was not because of some distinctive in their temperament-they were not simply tougher people. It had to do with what they believed about the world. The Christian approach to pain and evil with greater room for sorrow and greater basis for hope, was a major factor in its appeal."

The hope of the resurrection moved Christians to live differently. When plagues hit towns and regions Cyprian and Ignatius recorded how Christians did not abandon sick loved ones nor flee the cities, as most of the pagan residents did.

The beauty of the resurrection promise motivated and moved the church to serve with an other wordly love. This love was the distinctive mark of the church.

"See how they love one another."

+To God be the glory!

Day 30

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You.

*But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."
-2 Corinthians 12:9*

It was quite the scene.

My wife, my son, and my dad. These three "carried" me into the house when I came home from the hospital. It was a poor man's version of when a football player gets hurt. You know, when teammates and trainers carry them off the field.

My wife was on my right. My son on my left. My dad was backup from behind in case something went wrong.

It was a dagger to my pride.

My weakness. My frailty. My vulnerabilities.

The groom is supposed to carry the bride across the threshold. A father is supposed to pick up his son when he is knocked down. A son is supposed to lift up his father as he enters his twilight years.

I was living in the opposite world. Everything was reversed. Upside down. And I didn't like it! Maybe I'm old fashioned. Maybe I'm a traditionalist. Maybe I'm just a guy. But I don't want to be weak.

When it comes to love we want to be the strong ones. We want to be helping others. We don't want to be the one being helped. Certainly we appreciate the assistance but we want to be the rock of the family. The one others look to for strength. We don't want to be the needy one.

With Christian love there is the giver and receiver.

Actually, we are pretty good at being the giver. Honestly, we have trouble being the recipient. The challenges in life we face can be used by God to teach us. Many are heading back to school. It's time for us all to register. Orientation time. For what class? To learn how to receive. To not let foolish pride get in the way or one of her ugly step-children like arrogance, narcissism, or vanity.

Why is this lesson "Chapter 1" of the Christian Life?

Because the Alpha and Omega of the Christian life is about receiving the love of Christ Jesus. We bring nothing to give to the Judge in the celestial courtroom. Jesus gives us everything. He is the Giver. We are the receiver.

In fact, we even call worship the "Divine Service."

Forgiveness, life with Christ, and eternal salvation are the gifts given to all who are served by this Savior.

I'll always remember that scene. Carried by my family. In a way, it reminds me of how Christ will bring us all home.

I've had to learn how to be carried by others. May God be gracious to you so that you may learn how to be carried by Christ. It doesn't come naturally. It is a Gift given by the gift of baptism. No doubt! Christ and His company of angels will carry you home. It will be quite a scene! To be sure, practice giving love. But also practice receiving love. For the entire Christian life is based on receiving.

"Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you and I will carry you." -Isaiah 46:4

+To God be the glory!