

Day 31

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You.

*"I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."
-Isaiah 41:10*

The Lutheran Reformers described the Gospel as a promise!

Now, all the promises in Christ Jesus are wonderful. But some promises are more "intriguing" than others.

I've always thought that one of the most interesting promises of Jesus comes from the Gospel of Luke. The backdrop for this promise is when Christ forewarns the disciples that they will face religious persecution.

Jesus warns them that they will be brought before the authorities and put on trial. But He offers solace through an intriguing promise. The promise? The followers of Christ don't need to worry about what to say when they are brought before the judge. Even though their life will be on the line they don't need to hire a lawyer, write out a legal brief, or prepare a power point presentation. Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will tell them what to say in this pressure packed moment. No notes needed.

And here is the specific part I always found fascinating. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit will provide them with what to say "at that moment."

At first glance the phrase, "at that moment," might not seem like a big deal. A little throw away phrase in the verse with no consequence. But it is a big deal.

Yes, the Lord provides. But the Lord provides by His calendar and by His watch. His timing. He provides when the **MOMENT IS RIGHT!**

Jesus said, "Look, when you are in the moment I will provide what you need."

The Lord provides the strength to face all challenges - and not just the hardship of religious persecution - when the moment is right.

Right now you might be afraid. Wondering how you will have the strength to face the struggle before you. You might feel weak and frail at this very moment. Overwhelmed. Unable to face the future.

But the Lord promises He will be your strength in the moment. He may not give you the strength a day before. Nor will He be a day late.

But His timing is perfect.

And the Lord will be your strength **AT THAT MOMENT.** No worries.

Ask any comedian. Timing is everything.

Sure, your trouble is no laughing matter. So cast your troubles on Him, trusting He will uphold you with His own right hand.

And in that moment, His Spirit will be with you to strengthen you and help you.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

+To God be the glory!

Day 32

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You

"There was given me a thorn in my flesh." - 2 Corinthians 12:7

Every Rose Has Its Thorn.

I'm not talking about the woody perennial flowering plant of the genus *Rosa*, in the family Rosaceae.

I'm not talking about the song by 'Poison' in 1988.

I'm talking about you!

You are a rose. You are beautiful. Created in the image of God. Fearfully and wonderfully made. The crown of creation.

But every rose has its thorn.

Ask the Apostle Paul about thorns and he will tell you all about it in 2 Corinthians 12. Paul explains that he was given a "thorn in the flesh" so that he would not become conceited. But he never shared what was the exact nature of this "thorn."

Bible teachers and students have speculated for centuries. Some say this affliction was spiritual. Some say this affliction was emotional. Some even say that the thorn refers to a person, such as Alexander the coppersmith, who did Paul "a great deal of harm" (2 Timothy 4:14). My own personal theory is that Paul, who was Saul, participated in the trial and crucifixion of Jesus...and this memory plagued him for the rest of his life. Just like how he stoned Stephen to death, he might have been instrumental in the crucifixion of Jesus. No one can say for sure what Paul's thorn in the flesh was, but it was a source of real pain in the apostle's life.

In the end, many to most agree it was bodily.

Malaria? Migraines?

Chronic eye problems?

Epilepsy?

Speech disability?

Persecution? Hardship? Beatings? Shipwreck? Imprisonment?

Take your pick!

But whatever it was - it was given by God - so that Paul would never glory in self but in the God of all grace. "My grace is sufficient for you...for my power is made perfect in weakness."

One Christian writer frames it like this:

"No one likes to live in pain. Paul sought the Lord three times to remove this source of pain from him (2 Corinthians 12:8). He probably had many good reasons why he should be pain-free: he could have a more effective ministry; he could reach more people with the gospel; he could glorify God even more! But the Lord was more concerned with building Paul's character and preventing pride. Instead of removing the problem, whatever it was, God gave Paul more overwhelming grace and more compensating strength. Paul learned that God's power is made perfect in weakness (verse 9)."

How many times have you asked God to remove your thorn? I can tell you this! I've asked God to remove my thorns more than 3 times. How about 70×7 to use a Biblical number! Endless times I've asked God to remove my thorns and every time He says "no."

Maybe you too have asked God to remove the memory of a past indiscretion.
Maybe you too have asked God to remove the thorn of a physical disability.
Maybe you too have asked God to remove a blemish on your record.
And every time He says, "no."

Why?

Maybe so that we see His grace is sufficient. Maybe so that we see His divine power at work in our human weakness. Maybe so we look to the cross. Our true source of strength.

Roses have thorns to protect them from predators. The thorn is a layer of protection between the stem and a predator.

Satan is a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. He destroys us through spiritual pride. Oddly enough, your thorn might remain to protect you. To drive you into the arms of your Savior.

So when you pray, say: "Thy will be done."
For God's will is good and gracious.
Ask Saint Paul: "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

+To God be the glory!

Day 33

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You.

God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" -Galatians 4:6

Do we underestimate Jesus? Have we incorrectly judged the impact of His ministry? Miscalculated the importance of His teachings? Can He possibly be underrated?

Yes. Yes. Yes. And yes!

But how? How can Jesus be played down in our culture? We think we know the value of Jesus and His teaching because we have built a church on every corner in America. Of course we get it, we think to ourselves. Just look around. All the steeples, all the Bibles, all the crosses.

That is precisely the challenge in this pastoral letter.

Jesus doesn't want us looking around. He wants us looking up. To the Father. To the privilege of calling our God, dear Dad!

Joachim Jeremias, a German Lutheran theologian, studied the religious prayers of ancient Israel to the modern age of Judaism.

Yes, the Jews spoke about the "fatherhood" of God. But. And a very big "but." Not one time in the Old Testament, or the Talmud, or the Targums (oral interpretations of the Hebrew Bible) do the Jews PRAY to "Our Father." It is not until the 10th century A.D. in Italy that we find a prayer in Judaism addressed to the Father.

But when Jesus arrives? Things change! Don't underestimate His teachings, His ministry!

He teaches us that when we pray, say, "Our Father." This was jawdropping. Radical.

Revolutionary. No ear had heard, nor eye had seen.

God? Not just Maker or Judge.

But "Our Father." Dear Dad!

And the Son of God and Son of Man invites us into the sonship and daughterhood of the family of God through adoption in Holy Baptism.

What a sweet sentence!

In every prayer of Jesus in the Gospels, minus only one, Jesus refers to God as Father.

Ponder anew what the Almighty can do!

For once we were children of wrath. But not anymore. Now we are children of the Father through faith in His Son and His cross.

It is all over the pages of the New Testament that we can easily overlook what Jesus has done for us!

The privilege to call God, Father!

If you are sick on your back in bed, looking up, cry out: Abba!

Take confidence in the will of the Father in your life here in time, for eternity.

"If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask." -Matthew 7:11

The life and ministry of Jesus can never fully be appreciated.

It might be a prayer that is basic and common to Christianity, "Our Father."

But the goodness and grace of the Triune God is not commonplace. It is immeasurable and unsearchable.

Just remind yourself that you have the privilege to call the Lord of this universe: Father!

+To God be the glory!

Day 34

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You.

*"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for man."
-Colossians 3:23*

Why do you work...

Paycheck?

Pride?

Prestige?

Maybe it's just me, but it seems as if more and more people are frustrated with their jobs.

Medical professionals are tired.

Teachers and administrators are exhausted.

Pastors are burnt out.

Ask a restaurant owner. They just throw up their hands! They don't know on any given day if the dining room is opened or closed, serving inside or outside, mandatory masks or no masks. Is it delivery, curbside, or drive thru?

Covid craziness is getting to us all. Covid 19 is now Covid 21. Two weeks to stop the spread is now two years.

Covid craziness makes work seem like just a necessary evil. Many businesses cannot even find people to hire.

Some might even think work isn't even a necessary evil. Maybe just an evil to avoid at all costs.

Racial tensions in communities and the defund the police movement is frustrating law enforcement. Is it worth it?

Foreign policy is frustrating service members and military families with the images coming out of Afghanistan. Was the sacrifice of blood and treasure worth it?

Seems like there are now three things for certain in life: death, taxes...and frustration on the job!

A neighbor told me the other day while I was out walking: "No one really likes their job!" Maybe he was being dramatic. But there is always drama at work.

So, we all wonder: "Why do I work?"

The answer to the question is actually answered by asking another question.

"Who do you work for?"

Not man, but God.

You don't work for the one who signs your paycheck. Your boss truly is a Jewish Carpenter.

Michaelangelo spent years painting the roof of the Sistene Chapel. One day he was meticulously working on a corner of the roof. People wondered why he was working so diligently where no eye could see.

His reply: "But God sees it."

Yes, indeed. God does see it!

Do not work for the approval of man, but the approval of God.

Why do you work? Wrong question.

Who do you work for? Right question.

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for man."
You are the hearts and hands of Jesus in that place. That is your morning motivation.

For example, when you are in the hospital those hands of medical professionals are no ordinary hands. They are the instruments of God's grace to sustain life.

Jesus said it best: "Whatever you did for the least of my brothers, you did for me."

You don't even need to remember your caffeine to get going in the morning. You just need to remember "who" you work for in this life!

+To God be the glory

Day 35

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You.

"God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." - I Corinthians 10:13

Fever. Chills. Rash. Fatigue.
None of these are actually the problem.
They are symptoms of the problem.
The problem is an underlying infection.

Anxiety. Worry. Nerves. Concern.
None of these are actually the problem.
They are symptoms of the problem.
The problem is an underlying infection.

Our infection is diagnosed as "temptationem dubitatio." (Medical and theological terms are often in Latin. So I thought I would use a little Latin for fun.)

It sounds like a serious infection!

Well, it is.
It is Latin for the "temptation of uncertainty."

Our real struggle is: uncertainty.
Anxiety is just a symptom of the uncertainty of this life.
We are worried sick because we don't know what will happen tomorrow.

Health. Will I get better? What if I don't?
Relationships. Will my estranged child come home? Will my spouse divorce me?
Work. Will I be furloughed? Will I lose my job?
Finances. How can we afford it?

The fear is always the uncertainty of tomorrow.

It is interesting to note the most common negative prohibition Jesus gives us on the pages of the Gospels: "Fear not."

You would think it would be one of the Commandments. Like...

"Do not murder."

"Do not commit adultery."

"Do not steal"

"Do not bear false witness."

"Do not covet."

But Jesus knows us better than we even know ourselves.
Jesus knows our greatest fear is tomorrow.
So He comforts us with a beautiful promise.
We need not fear what tomorrow brings!
Why? God is faithful!

Dig deep into I Corinthians 10:13. Dive deep into this promise to the Christian church in Corinth and to you.

The Lord promises He will provide a way of escape. The tunnel on the path might seem pitch black. We might not see the way out. No one might see the way out. But He is the Light of the World. The Lamp to our feet and the Light to our path. He not only sees the way out, He has paved the path of escape!

Paul is reminding us that in God's own good time He will create the specific way out. The way of escape has been ordained in His will for our lives.

The way of escape is the Cross!

The struggle might not be removed, for we live in a fallen world. While we might have to endure the trial for a season, Paul reminds us that we do not have to be drowned in these trials. We will feel the temptation, but we do not have to give into the temptation.

Why? The cross is our escape. Our light in the darkness. Our promise of a bright future. Our tomorrow is eternity in heaven with Christ Jesus and all the company of heaven.

Until that day, the Lord gives us little glimpses of escape here on this earth according to His will, foreshadowing our final escape. Thank God!

The uncertainty of tomorrow need not be negative. But new opportunities for us to be faithful in His promises.

His Word, His Sacrament, His Church.
All of these are gifts given to us to endure.

Just don't leave the past behind, but also put away the worry of tomorrow.

+To God be the glory!