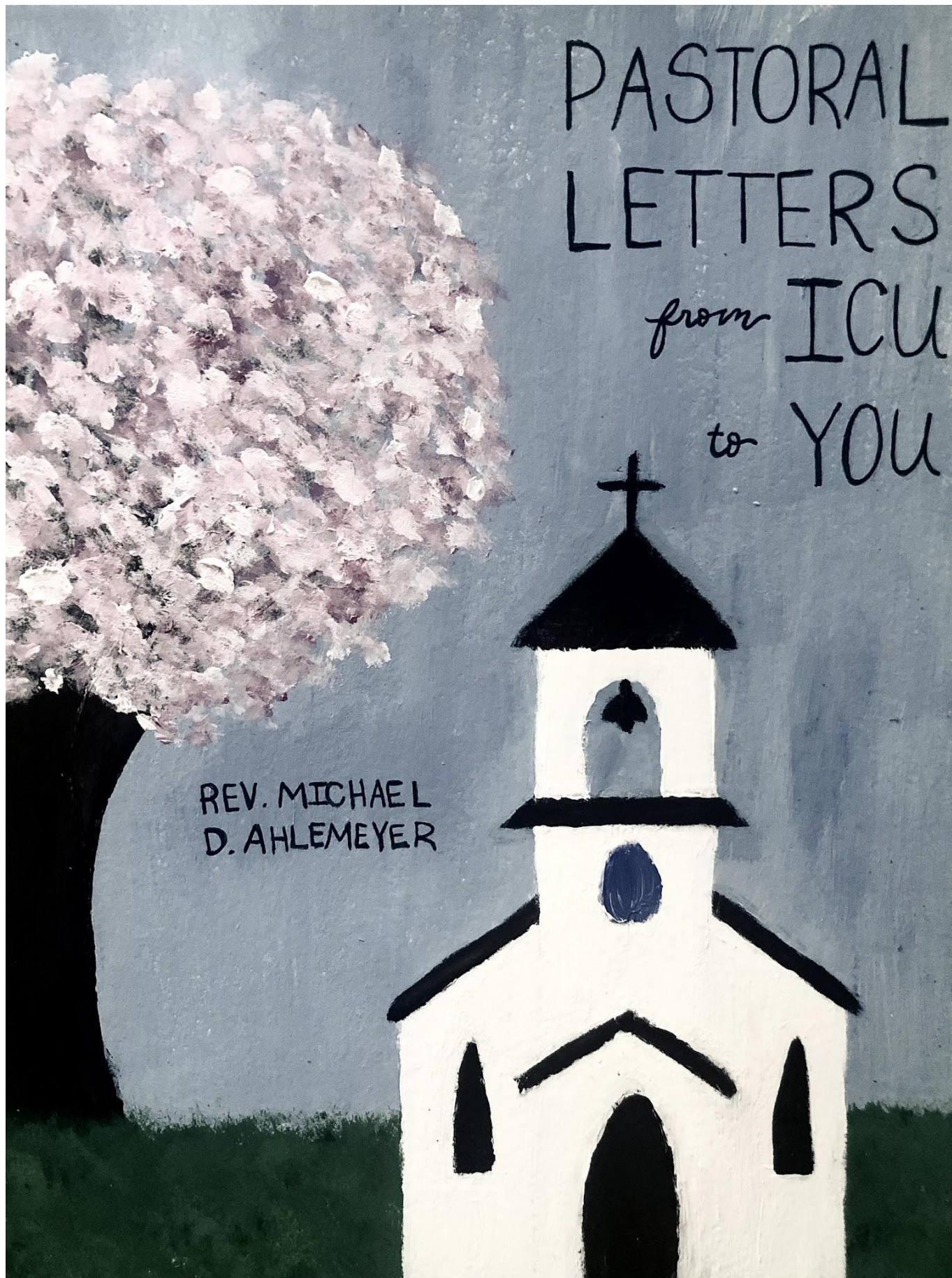


# PASTORAL LETTERS *from* ICU *to* YOU

REV. MICHAEL  
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## Day 1: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"I will speak of your goodness, all day long I will speak of your salvation." -Psalm 71:1

I have been publicly preaching and teaching the Word for almost twenty years. Speaking the Gospel is my profession, my calling, my daily life. But one day I woke up with no voice. I had been intubated. I was on a ventilator. I had undergone a tracheostomy. I was connected to a life support machine known as ECMO. While the world moved on, I was still in a hospital bed for over six weeks fighting for my life. I was mostly sedated and unconscious through most of my battle with Covid pneumonia.

When I finally "came to" and was semi-alert, the first thing I realized was that my voice was gone. I couldn't really talk. I also couldn't move a muscle. Literally. I could not roll over in bed and I could barely lift up my arms. I've had to learn how to do everything all over again. Stand up. Sit down. Brush my teeth. Use a spoon. Write. Type. Climb the stairs. There was a hole in my heart.

But what bothered me the most was that there was a hole in my throat, from the tracheostomy. Daily I was reminded of this new reality when it was cleaned and bandaged - no matter how hard I tried to forget. Even when I finally went home my superhuman wife Jaki continued to care for the wound. Talk about being married for "better or worse."

In time, no voice has turned into a whisper, and with more time the whisper has turned into a hoarse voice. As of this writing, I am still more or less at that point. The medical folks say in time my voice will hopefully come back. But in those dark moments of the night, literally and figuratively, when I'm all alone, I wonder if it will ever truly come back.

So while I was still in bed, this familiar verse always came to mind: "Be still and know that I am God."

I have had a lot of time to be still and think during my hospitalization and convalescence. I couldn't do much else and I'm still limited. Being left with your thoughts can be a tortuous time, I can assure you of this fact! But it can also be a blessing, I can equally assure you of this fact. In the end, I want to reassure you that it was more of a blessing than a curse. I also want to remind you of what you already know from the Word. The goodness of God even in bad times! The goodness of God even in ICU.

If anyone ever told you while you were in ICU to "rest up," they have never been in ICU. Every hour it seems someone comes into the room poking you and prodding you. Taking medicines, taking x-rays, taking vitals.

So, during the night I was often awake and left to wrestle with God like Jacob. I never got angry with God. I never asked, "Why me?" But I wrestled with God over many things. One was my voice. Or lack thereof.

But back to the time left alone with God to think. One question was my voice in general, but more specifically what made a pastor's voice unique? What makes the pastor's voice different from other voices?

Here is the answer. "The only thing a pastor has to say is what God has to say." This quote is from Dr. Steven Lawson, Teaching Fellow for Ligonier Ministries.

Point? The Word of God is different in a unique way. It's the reason why the pastor preaches in a pulpit, wears an alb, and dresses in a clerical collar. Signifying that this Word proclaimed is no mere word of man, but He speaks the Word of God.

The bottom line between human language and a divine message?



You and I can only describe things with our words. God's word actually makes things. It has power. I can tell you not to worry. But in the end, that doesn't mean much. When Jesus says, "Cast all your cares on me for I care for you," He actually makes that happen.

Recall the Creation story! When God spoke His Word He did not just describe light but created light. When God spoke He didn't just report about the water below and the sky above, He placed the fish and stars in their ordained place and space. When God spoke it wasn't just a chronicle of the earth, He filled the world with a creation fearfully and wonderfully made - including you.

God's Word does what it says. It transforms us and makes us saints from sinners. It renews, restores, and reconciles. It resurrects! On the last day, Jesus will stand over your grave and speak a word of Life. You and all those in Christ will be made new again!

This is what makes the Word of God so special. It creates! Life from death. It makes certain defeat, undeniable triumph. It makes our lowly bodies to be like His resurrected body.

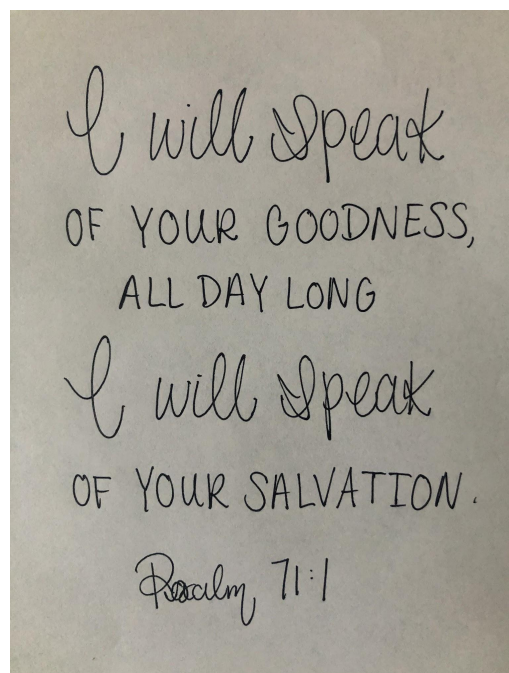
In my toughest hours of uncertainty this was my hope. God can make all things new! His living Word I have preached with a loud voice for almost two decades, but only when I was silenced in ICU did I really begin to understand this promise of how the Word actually works and what makes this Word so special. Speaking on our own we can only describe, when God speaks He can create beauty.

I found it ironic one day when I was in the hospital, that while I looked at myself in the mirror, that the hole from the trach - now scar - is in the exact same place where the white tab of the clerical collar rests on my neck.

It was never my frail voice. It is never your feckless voice. It was and is and will always be the voice of the Living God who created and makes new again. This is what we proclaim as witnesses. New beginnings. Either new beginnings for a gracious season here in this life for a few more fleeting moments, or the eternal beginning for life everlasting.

When you look in the mirror at yourself at home and look at the pastor preaching the Word in your church home - remember something special is happening - God is alive and active and making you a new creation!

+To God be the glory.



## Day 2: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"Vanity of vanities." - Ecclesiastes 1:2

Self-discovery.

There are moments in life where we learn a lot about ourselves.

Going off to college. Getting married. Having kids. Retirement.

ICU?

In ICU I discovered something about myself. I'm not exactly proud to admit it publicly. But I'm a vain person. Are you?

You see, in ICU I started to lose my hair. Reason? Stress, poor nutrition, medications. Side effect of Covid. Maybe all the above. Maybe none of the above. Who knows? All I know is my hair is thinning out. I also know I'm not very happy about it.

Maybe when I should be thanking God I'm alive, I catch myself cursing God that my hair is falling out. Maybe I should be focused on the health of my heart and lungs. This seems rational after being on life support!

But sinful attitudes never appeal to reason. Sin is by definition the opposite of godly reason.

So, I find myself fretting over the hairs on my head. It all reminds me of the phrase from an old song, "You're so vain."

The problem with vanity is that you not only sound and look like a fool, but you lose sight of priority and perspective.

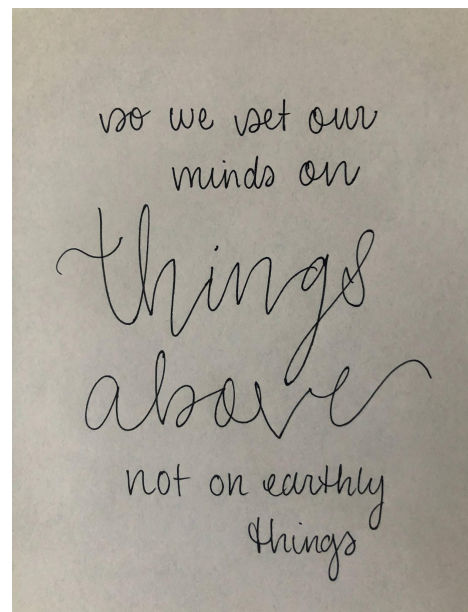
In vanity we navel gaze at ourselves with blinders on to the point where we can't see anything or anyone else, including Jesus. We worry about the things we shouldn't be worried about and we overlook the things we should be setting our hearts and minds on...like the cross and the heavenly things above.

The next time you find yourself caught in the tangled web of vanity, remember, there is One who already "knows the number of hairs on your head." He knows you. He cares for you. He forgives you.

He loves without condition. He loves even the vain.

That is a Divine discovery!

+To God be the glory!





### Day 3: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." -Matthew 19:26

Five retired pastors have been a member of our church family over the last decade. One of the retired pastors has a "habit" of leaving me notes of encouragement. It's weird. Weird in a good way. Every time the note shows up it is exactly what I needed to hear at that moment.

Recently, this retired pastor, who I admire greatly, left a note updating me on his health and encouraging me during my health challenges.

One part of the note stood out and jumped off the page. "Jesus never promised it would be easy, but that all things are possible."

Stop. Re-read that line...again...and again.

"Not easy, but possible."

Yes, in Christ all things are possible. The Lord is in the business of making the impossible possible. Scripture testifies to it.

God's presence in life looks to be impossible to mere human eyesight. The eyesight of faith sees something different.

The Lord will walk you through the impossible valley of the shadow of death to the green pastures of life everlasting.

The Lord will forgive sins that others in your life find impossible to forgive.

The Lord will hear your prayer and give an improbable answer. As the former Lutheran Hour Speaker was fond of saying, "The Lord does not answer with a 'yes' or 'no.' He answers with a 'good' or 'better.'" What does this mean? Well, for example, in days of ill health the Lord answers His children with the answer of 'good' or 'better,' perhaps in this way - the good blessing of earthly healing or He answers with the better blessing of eternal healing.

We can trust God's will. Not by our power. That's impossible. The trials and tribulations of this world are simply too great. But by His Spirit He makes the impossible possible. He gifts us not only with salvation but also with a faith and trust in His plan of salvation no matter what comes our way. Resting in His will and not wrestling with His will is our calling. And this is possible because no matter the outcome of our struggle we are more than conquerors! Does it mean this will be easy? No.

Perfect peace is ours but not fully experienced until we enter heaven.

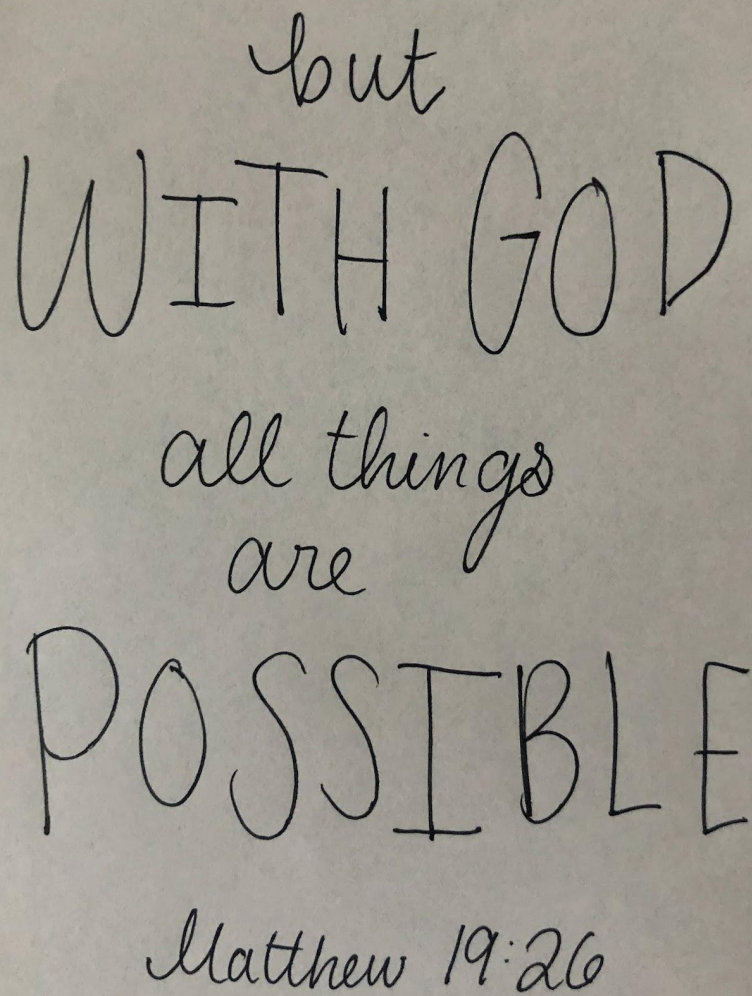
The point of this verse in Matthew 19:26 is not a quick fix miracle cure from the troubles of this life. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble." Too often Christianity is hijacked by the health, wealth and prosperity false preachers. Believe me, the prosperity gospel does not work when you are in ICU. The point of this verse is to point us to the cross, the ultimate miracle cure. Mt. Calvary is the place where the impossible became possible. It is the place where we see poor, miserable sinners, who have no possibility to save themselves are now given grace upon grace. Jesus continued to say, "take heart, you have overcome the world." How? Where? When? Easter. Easter is the day when the impossible became possible.

And you are an Easter people!

Until that day of the great resurrection and reunion there will be easy and hard days. Even in the difficult days we journey with Jesus. He will bring healing of body and soul either here in time or for eternity. You are always in a win-win situation as a Christian. Never forget this promise. It is hard to hold on to this promise. Trust me. I know from my own experience in ICU. But God will hold on to you! And in the end, that is all that matters!

After all, He is the Great Physician.

+To God be the glory.



but  
WITH GOD  
all things  
are  
POSSIBLE  
Matthew 19:26

## Day 4: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"Man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps." - Proverbs 16:9

I didn't see the sun for way over a month. The bright spot in my room was hanging on the wall. Jaki and the kids made two poster boards filled with family pictures. It was something that put a smile on my face.

It was also something that created internal consternation. What if I didn't make it and the Lord called me home? What would happen to the kids? Had I made enough plans to ensure the kids were taken care of if my health failed?

We are called to "make plans." We are also comforted in knowing God directs our way.

Earthly parents do not parent alone. A husband and wife also have a heavenly parent, Our Father, working with them and for their children.

To cut to the chase...our children are really God's children. Ultimately, they are not ours but His. On loan to us, you might say, as caretakers of a gift. As the psalm writer says, they are a "gift to parents." We usually think of Stewardship in the Lutheran church in the framework of Time, Talents, and Treasures. But it also helps us and comforts us when it comes to parenting. We are not owners of our children but called by God to be caretakers of His sons and daughters.

We make plans for our kids, as we should, but God will direct their way using those plans or, at times, despite those plans.

Your child is a child of God. He never forsakes them or leaves them. He does not leave them as orphans. He provides. And He provides in ways we might never even imagine in the future.

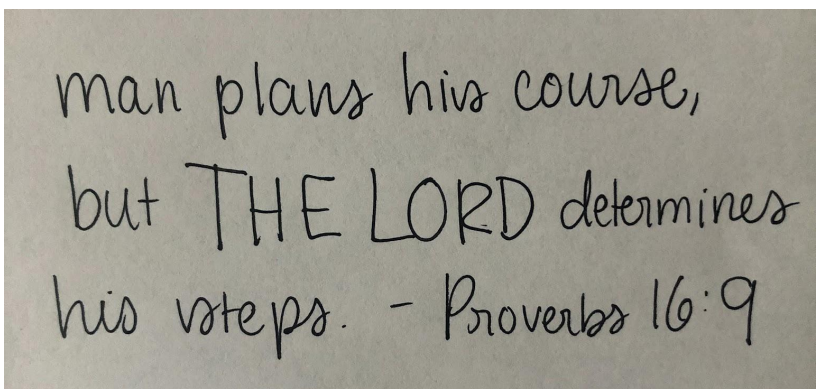
This promise is especially a comfort to parents who have a child who has wandered from the faith. Earthly parents maybe feel like they have exhausted every avenue in bringing them back home to the church. As a pastor, I've sat in my office or had a conversation in the narthex with a fair share of parents who feel hopeless over a wayward child.

Yes, it might be true that you are at an impasse. But there is one more parent - a Heavenly Father - and His Holy Spirit never takes a vacation. He is always chasing the prodigal child. He never gives up. He is always at work. There is always hope!

Mom and dad...take heart, you're not in this parenting role all alone.

Make your plans and watch the Lord direct their steps.

+To God be the glory!



man plans his course,  
but THE LORD determines  
his steps. - Proverbs 16:9



## Day 5: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"Love your neighbor" -Matthew 5:43

Every morning the nurses or physical therapist asked me what day it was? What month? Numerical day? Day of the week?

As they would pick up the dry erase marker and write the day on the white board hanging on the wall, I gave it a whirl. I gave it a good guess. The old college try. You might be proud of your pastor. I had a perfect record. 100%. I never got it right one time. I missed every time.

Why? A good answer for why I never knew what day it was might be for starters because I was on or just got off high powered medications. Paralytic drugs.

A better answer? Everyday seemed the same. In ICU there is no difference between Easter Day and Christmas Day. Halloween and Valentine's Day are all the same. Everyday "looks" and "feels" the same. There is no sense of time. Day is night and night is day.

In fact, they played a mean trick on me, joking here, sort of. My room had a clock that went by military time. I called Jaki a few times during the middle of the night thinking it was the middle of the day, because the whole military time just wasn't computing in my mind.

Time, days, weeks, months...life does go on for the healthy, while life stops for the sick.

If you have ever been seriously injured, severely ill, or hospitalized for an extended amount of time you know what I'm talking about.

The frustration! So much frustration.

The frustration of not being able to do all the things you normally do - or used to do. The frustration of not being active. The frustration of not being productive. The frustration of just sitting around. Did I mention the frustration?

If you are down for the count, life still goes on around you. While you look at social media...friends and family are at birthday parties and BBQ's and the beach, weddings and baby showers, confirmations and graduation. Cool vacations.

Those who struggle with ill health feel more than physical pain. There is the pain of isolation. The separation from community.

When Jesus performed miracles this is often an overlooked part of His work. Yes, the miracle of physical healing was a huge blessing, but the healing often brought the individual another big blessing. It brought them back into the community. For example, the physical healing Jesus often brought on the pages of the Gospels freed people from being ostracized because their ailment rendered them ceremonially unclean.

God does not call us to solve the world's problems. The world is His. But He has given us a world where the neighbor is now ours. He does call us to love our neighbor.

"Adopt" one person in your life who is often ostracized from community and specifically your church family. Drop by and visit. Share your favorite recipe, watch the football game with them or look at family pictures with them, listen to their stories, pick up and drop off a devotional from church, pray with them, or if possible, give them a ride to church.

A shut-in who has gone on to heaven once told me, "I'd rather suffer in good company, than be healthy and all alone."

When you recite the creed this Sunday, "I believe in the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints," remember those isolated and remember to love your neighbor.

+To God be the glory!

But I tell you, love your  
enemies and pray for  
those who persecute you...

For He causes His sun  
to rise on the evil and  
the good, and sends  
rain on the righteous  
and the unrighteous.

Matthew 5:43-45

## Day 6: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord, hear my voice." -Psalm 130:1

Many of you know I love baseball. I also enjoy watching baseball movies. A few of my favorites are The Rookie, The Natural, 42, Moneyball, and Million Dollar Arm. It's not one of my favorites but there is a classic line in "A League of Their Own." Can you picture Tom Hanks, playing the role of manager Jimmy Dugan, saying, "There's no crying in baseball."

From time to time we are tempted to think there should be no crying in the Christian faith. A true Christian would never cry to God, or so we might think, but should always praise Him. You might even feel as if you are a weak Christian, if you cry out. We are fooled into thinking faith should be so grand and glorious that it never succumbs to barring its soul but should move forward with a stiff upper lip. This line of thinking tells us faith should be impenetrable to our emotions, including tears.

But the psalmist constantly and consistently "cries out to the Lord." This hymnbook of the Bible is filled with different types of psalms. Wisdom, praise and thanksgiving. And also "laments." Some say a third of the psalms are laments (I've never counted. I'll take their word for it.)

So what do we make of this?

This letter is very simple and straightforward. Crying out to the Lord can be a negative, but it can also be a positive.

How?

The lament psalms teach us that it's never wrong to cry out to God for help. God hears us in our pain and welcomes us close.

Listen to how Jessica Brodie describes the lament psalms...

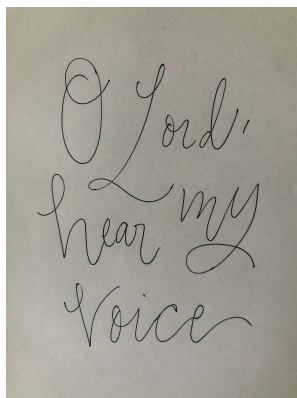
"Have you ever been so overcome with anguish you not only feel overwhelmed with sorrow but also utterly, completely, soul-despairingly alone, as if no one on earth could possibly understand the depths of your pain? In times like these, it helps to remember God is there, and He's ready to shoulder your burdens, suffering, and distress. Not only does God understand and see you in the center of your pain, but He's available for you, listening and ready as you cry out your heartache, anger, or sadness."

Crying out to God is not weakness, but it is actually a great confession of faith. Your cry is acknowledging that only God can help you and sustain you in your day of trouble; whether that be physical, emotional or spiritual pain.

When we cry out we acknowledge God is our everything!

So yes, there is crying in the Christian faith. But we do not mourn like the world. We mourn with hope! And a hope that does not disappoint us.

+To God be the glory!





## Day 7: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"By His wounds we are healed." -Isaiah 53:5

The only scars in heaven will be the scars of Jesus. For there were no scars in Eden and there will be no scars in Eden 2.0. But in between Eden and Eden 2.0, here on this earth, our bodies bear the proof of the fallout of the Fall.

My body is no exception. I have scars on my face, neck, chest, wrist, arms, torso, and legs. All from being in ICU. (Almost sounds like the old song, "Head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes"). I might invest in Vitamin E with the amount of lotion I have used!

Scars remind us of the pain. You might be a senior citizen and have a scar from when you fell off your bike as a small child. Every time you see the scar you see the accident. A college teammate of mine grew a beard to cover a scar on his face, so he didn't have to explain to everyone his foolish antics that lead to the very visible mark.

Not every scar can be covered. Not every scar is physical. Not every scar has to be a memory of suffering.

Scars can be transformed into emblems of grace. God's grace in our lives. Reminding us that God's healing hand was with us.

They can teach us humility and help foster a spirit of dependency on God. Recalling we are dust and to dust we shall return. But thanks be to God we eagerly await that day when our lowly bodies will be like His glorious body.

A soldier in battle or a mother during childbirth might years later bear scars that are beautiful reminders of the sacrifice upholding the sanctity and value of human life.

Ephesians 5 reminds us, there will be no "blemish" on our body or soul in heaven. How? For the blood atonement of Jesus is more powerful than the dermatologist's tricks of Vitamin E or cocoa butter.

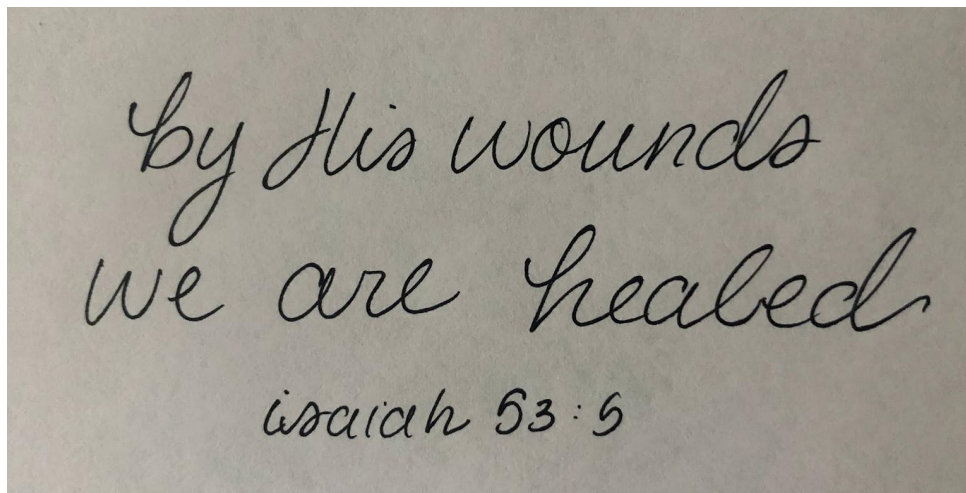
For His scars have made us at one with the Father. For His death was ours that we might live.

Go ahead and join Thomas in looking at His hands and His sides. Touch the scars of Jesus.

Go ahead and look at your scars. Because they will not be there for long. Because by His wounds we are healed.

Until that day wear them proudly as evidence that He sustains us until life everlasting!

+To God be the glory!



## Day 8: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"We are more than conquerors." -Romans 8:37

I have lived in Alabama for 12 college football seasons. A team from the state of Alabama has won the national championship in 7 of those 12 seasons. Scorecard? The Alabama Crimson Tide have 6 and the Auburn Tigers have 1.

It's fun in the Fall to live in a place where your team is always winning! No one likes to lose.

Here is the good news for Christians! You are on the winning team.

A major theme in the psalms is that God will conquer His enemies, who also happen to be our enemies. Read Psalm 2 and you will immediately experience this victory. In fact, Psalm 2 reminds us that the Lord laughs, scoffs, at those who think they will defeat Him.

So can we!

The Lord will be victorious here on this earth or ultimately on the last day. No matter the enemy waging war against us - whether they be physical ailments, emotional assaults on our heart, or spiritual warfare in whatever form or fashion - we are more than conquerors.

Our fear is that we look at the scoreboard, our circumstances in this life, and we are tempted to think we are on the losing team. The psalms remind us that the arc of history always bends to the Christian putting a "W" in the win column. For no one and no thing can defeat Him. And everything Christ has won, He has given to us.

No Christian in the past has ever lost. No Christian in the future will ever be defeated.

You are on the winning side. Contrary to what cable news or social media might tell you.

This is no prosperity gospel. This is THE GOSPEL.

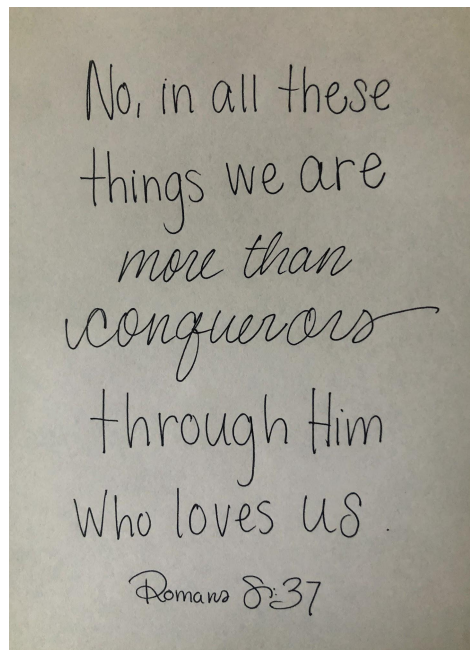
Martin Luther penned it best in the hymn, A Mighty Fortress: "And take they our life, Goods, fame, child and wife, Though these all be gone, Our victory has been won; The kingdom ours remaineth."

Our victory has been won!

Even if you are in a place like ICU, do not be fooled. You are a victor in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Don't quit at halftime. Watch the game unfold until the buzzer, I mean trumpet, sounds!

+To God alone be the glory.



## Day 9: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"Cast all your cares on Him, for He cares for you." - 1 Peter 5:7

It's almost as if God is my last resort when He should be my first choice.

I have a tendency to only pray about something after I have tried to solve it first. If I can't solve the problem, then I take it to God in prayer. My problem is really control. I want to be in control of the situation. Instead of God being in control, if I'm honest, I prefer to be in control. And when I'm not in control, I get anxious.

God is so good that He invites us to cast all of our cares on Him. All. Not some. Not a few. Not the big. Or just the small. But all of our anxieties.

We will have anxiety. That isn't the question. The question is what we do with our anxiety.

It is worth highlighting Peter does NOT say that we are to deny our anxiety, ignore our anxiety, mask our anxiety, fight our anxiety, or run from our anxiety.

Peter tells us to "cast" our anxiety on Jesus.

It is an action word. Telling us to literally "throw" our anxiety. The Greek gives the modern picture of the garbage man who comes down your street and just chucks the garbage into the back of the truck. In fact, he often does it so violently that a good bit of your trash ends up on the street waiting for next week's pickup!

The key to learning how to "cast" is to back up to verse 6 in 1 Peter 5. Peter links casting with humility. "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He might lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you."

We never work out the shoulders in God's gym, the church. But we do work out the knees. Purposefully, God did not give you broad enough shoulders to carry your burdens. In worship, we kneel. We kneel as a symbol of humility. That we are not in control. That He is in control.

That is a good thing. That is a great thing.

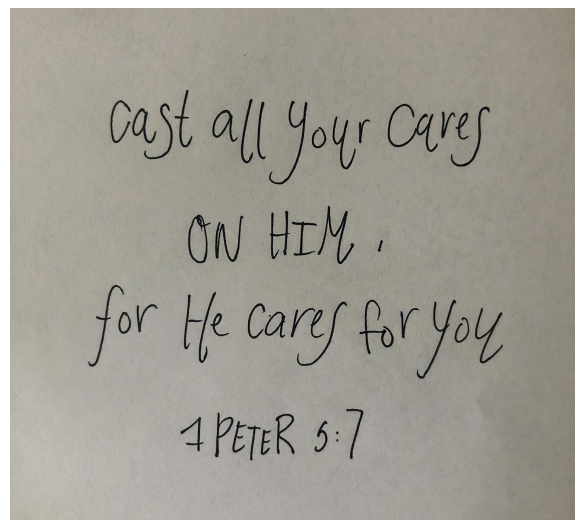
The sovereignty of God is a great comfort to the Christian.

A big view of God results in smaller problems. A small view of God results in bigger problems.

A Christian preacher has a wonderful way of putting it: "The presence of humility results in the absence of anxiety. The presence of anxiety results in the absence of humility."

Take it to the Lord in prayer. For He cares for you!

+To God be the glory!





## Day 10: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."

-Psalm 139:16

Ever go on vacation and need a vacation after your vacation? When you got home you were totally exhausted. You needed a few days to recover before heading back to work. In fact, vacation was more tiring than work.

How did this happen? You traveled to some enchanted land or one of your favorite destinations. You only had a few days. So, you try to fit in everything...see everything and do everything. I mean everything.

Disney? Sound familiar? You go from sunset to sundown.

"Hey," you think to yourself, "we might never be back here again. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity."

This attitude not only puts a damper on a vacation, but also on life.

We can be fooled into thinking that a "full" or abundant life is determined by either a long life or whether we checked off all the boxes on our Bucket List. Preferably we want both- quantity and quality of life.

So, we feel an unhealthy pressure to make sure our life was a life worth living. Or we feel cheated if life throws us a curveball and we experience ill health, struggling finances, or broken relationships.

Scripture reminds us that God looks at things differently. So should we.

Every day of your life has a number. God started numbering them before you were born. He will keep numbering them until the day you die. Then there will be numberless days in eternal heaven with Him.

God has already written all the days of your life in His book. He has already numbered the days of your life and has ordained that number to be right in His eyes. The days given glorify Him.

Whether that number is 1 year or 10 years or 100 years - your life will achieve the purpose for why He sent it into this world.

Do you know someone who is terrified of everything? Terrified of flying? Terrified of the ocean? Terrified of doctors and the hospital? Terrified of getting hurt and dying? Terrified of not living a long life? Terrified of not checking off all the items on their bucket list?

God cheats none of His children. He knows the right timing.

Remember! He has given us life everlasting. He gives His heirs an inheritance of treasures beyond our wildest dreams. Both quantity and quality.

Your number of days on earth has already been ordained. Your place in heaven has already been prepared. Fear not! Take heart. Let not your heart be troubled.

"This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!"

+To God be the glory!

in Your book were  
written, every one  
of them, the days  
that were formed  
for me, when as  
yet there were  
none of them.

PSALM 139:6

## 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.

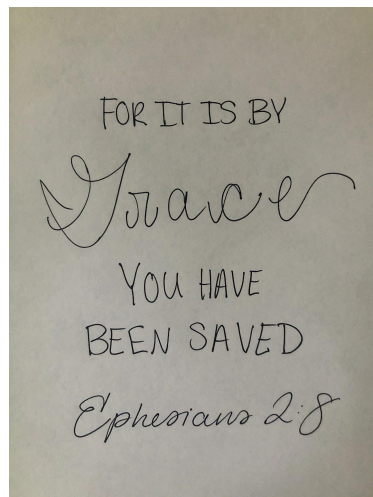
Yes, we should have learned our lesson by now. Yes, after living through certain defining moments in life, you would think we would get our acts together.

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 breathtaking 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, horse racing 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 I 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.

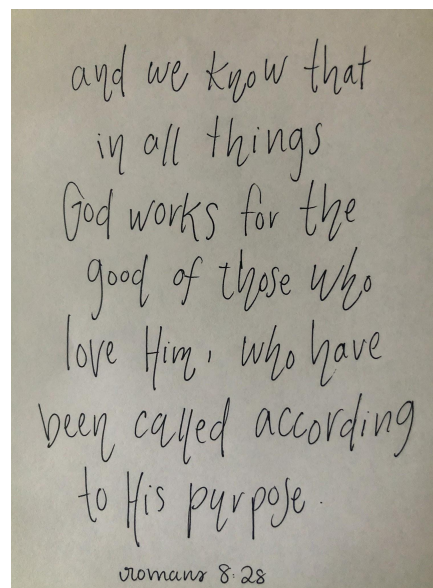
You might not be able to explain the sufferings, setbacks and sickness in this life. I know I can't.

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.

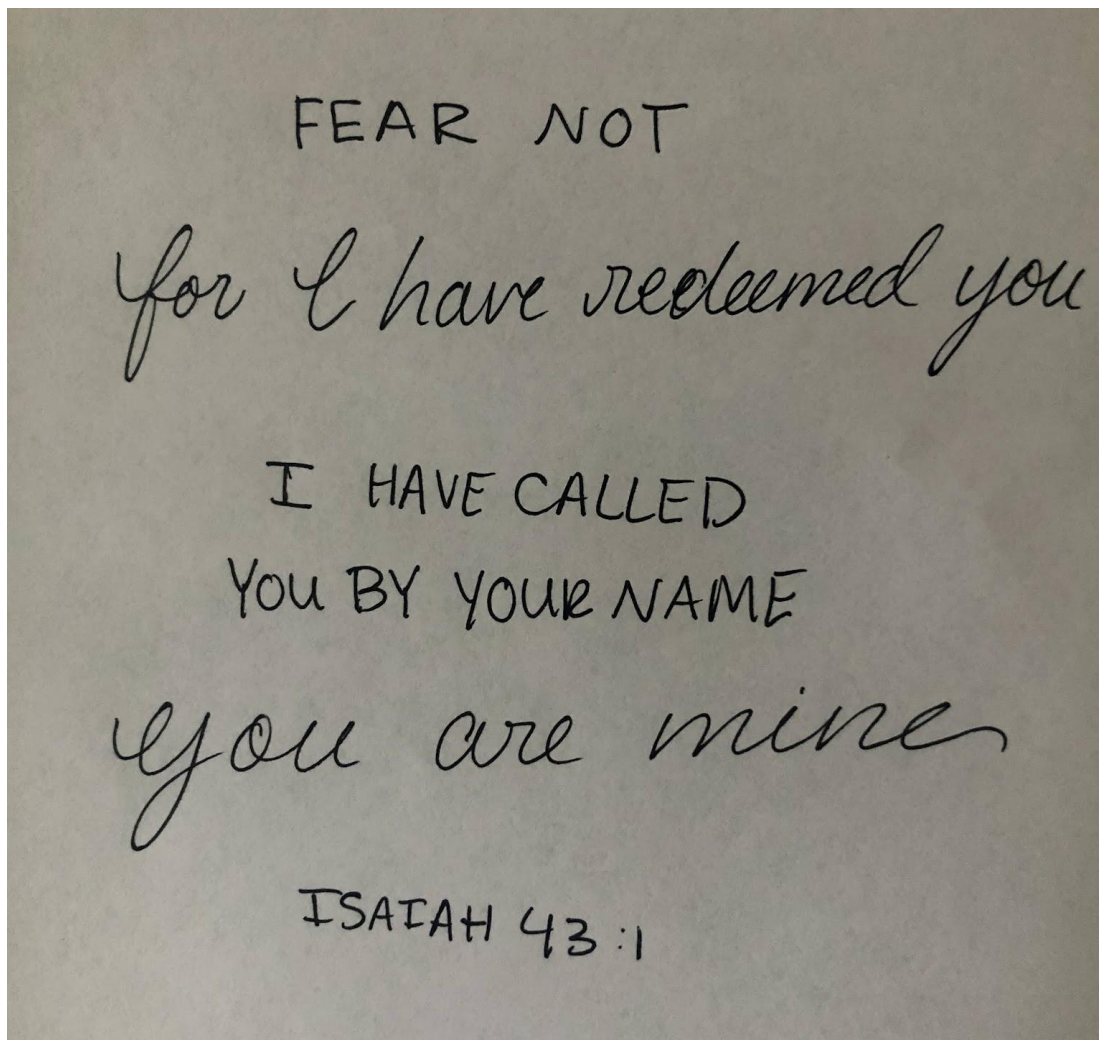
But the Lord knows you by name. He is the one who will be with you always to the very end of the age. He never forgets His own.

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 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!

since we are surrounded by  
such a great cloud  
of witnesses,

LET US RUN WITH  
PERSEVERANCE

the race set before us

## 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.

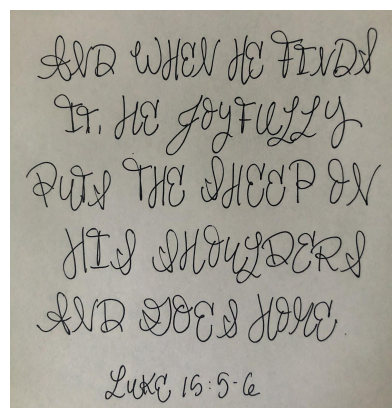
Paul looked to the joy before him and freely admitted he would rather go to his home in heaven than stick around here in this rental property we call earth.

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!



## Day 16: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"My sheep listen to my voice." -John 10:27

Who you listen to matters!

The voices of the unholy trinity of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh is in constant competition with the voice of the second person of the Trinity. It's almost like dueling banjos. When the Good Shepherd proclaims His Word to His flock with the certainty of an exclamation mark, this triumvirate of sinister skepticism whispers into your ear the doubt of a question mark.

To Adam and Eve in the Garden the devil pulled this ancient switcheroo. Exchanging certainty with doubt. Remember the first temptation, the exclamation mark traded for the question mark: "Do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil!" was substituted for "Did God really say?"

When a child of God is suffering in this life the unholy trinity of doubt loves to pick up the hot microphone and take the stage and ask, "If God really loves you, why are you suffering?"

The world works overtime to question the goodness of God. It is a voice that never seems to grow hoarse. It never waxes or wanes. Sin seemingly never grows tired.

But the sheep know the voice of the Good Shepherd. You know the voice of your Good Shepherd. Listen to His voice.

At the Transfiguration, the voice of the Father spoke from the cloud and said concerning Jesus, "Listen to Him."

Who you listen to matters!

Discern His voice. How do you discern? You listen to Scripture. Don't just read theological commentaries, devotionals, or listen to podcasts of the next trendy pastor, or opine at the weekly community Bible study. Don't hang around churches where the common refrain in Bible study is: "I think or feel like this is something Jesus would do." Make yourself comfortable in a congregation of believers where the pastor proclaims, "Thus says the Lord."

Immerse yourself in Scripture.

A pre-seminary professor I had at Concordia University in Ann Arbor, Michigan always said, "The only Bible you have is the Bible you know."

Unfortunately, in today's world, for too many, the only Bible they know is the 'Bible' they have heard about on the street.

Listen to His voice. Go to the source. Don't just listen to the voices of this world who talk about His voice. Listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd for yourself. And listen to the voices of undershepherds who are captive to His voice.

Research suggests that the unborn recognize the voice of their mother already in the second trimester. Amazing! The heart rate of the unborn increases when they hear their mom's voice. Demonstrating that they become more alert. They also have the ability to discern between mom's voice and other female voices.

Jesus said, "My sheep know my voice."

Wherever you find someone or something putting a question mark in place of the exclamation mark of God's Law and Gospel, you know the voice is the hireling who comes to rob and steal. Wherever you find the exclamation mark of God's mercy and grace for sinners calling them to repentance, renewal, reconciliation and resurrection - you know you have found the voice of the Good Shepherd who comes to lay down His life for the sheep.

The voice of the world offers nothing good. It only offers counterfeits of God's perfect creation and His promise of a new creation in the cross. Jesus offers something good to someone. Someone named "you."

Breaking news! The portrayal of Jesus on social media and mass media isn't necessarily the Jesus of the Gospels.

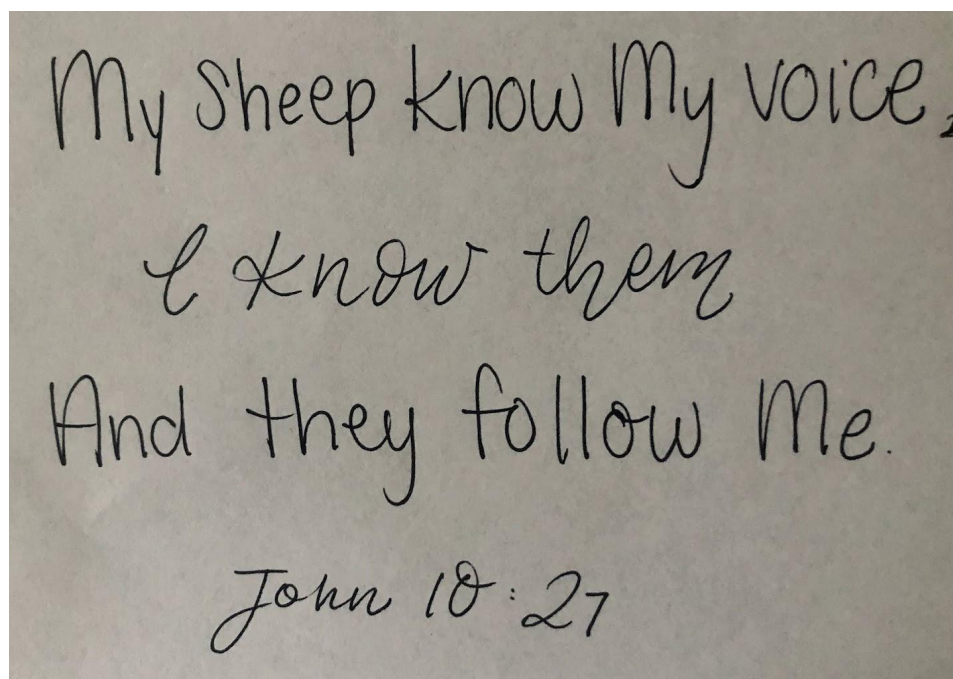
Listen to Him!

Because who you listen to matters!

Remember, the only Bible you have is the Bible you know.

Jesus is an open Book. The world wants to close the Book. That might be a tipoff in who you can trust...

+To God alone be the Glory.



My Sheep know My voice,  
I know them  
And they follow Me.  
John 10:27



## Day 17: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable of him.'" - Genesis 2:18

Who is the most important pastor in your life?

Answer? It might surprise you. Not the pastor who baptized or confirmed you. Not the pastor who married you. Not the pastor who held your hand in the hospital. Not the pastor who grieved with you by the gravestone.

The most important pastor in your life - in a unique way - is actually your spouse. Let me explain...

First, I mean small "p" pastor. Don't worry. I'm not trying to play games with the Office of the Keys. At your church, the one called and ordained is your 'Pastor,' with a capital "P." Publicly entrusted to preach & teach the Word and serve as the caretaker of celebrating the sacraments.

Your spouse is a special gift from God to help you. This is one of the reasons why God gave marriage. Genesis uses specific language - the term "helpmate."

This word implies more than helping around the house, helping raise the kids, or helping pay the bills.

The number one way they serve - you serve - as a helpmate? By daily shepherding one another through this life in Christ. By pointing each other to Jesus in all things.

"Helpmate" in Hebrew is what we might think of as a 'compound' word...this is a non-technical way of breaking this down. One of the words is "ezer." It is used in Scripture as a military term. To "fight" or "battle" in order to "save." Often attributed to the work of the Lord.

But here in Genesis it is given in marriage.

Spouses are...

To fight for the kids. To battle for one another. To fight and battle for their marriage. To save one another.

Ultimately, to point one another to the Saviour.

The most important preacher in your life is your spouse! Do you preach Christ to your spouse? Do you battle with them against the temptations of this world? Do you fight the fight of faith alongside them?

How many times have you reassured them they have a Saviour? Do you help them by preaching the Law when they need to hear it? Do you preach the Gospel of unconditional grace to them each day?

There are many characteristics we look for when it comes to marriage material. Cute, funny, witty, smart, athletic, musical, conversationalist, able to provide, genuine, kind, romantic...

If you are young, or have younger children, or young at heart and looking to get married, first on this list? Small "p" pastor.

Will this person draw me closer to Christ?

Personal confession time! Our marriage is far from perfect. I don't need to air our dirty laundry to make the point. After all, marriage is a perfect gift from God above lived out by imperfect people here below. Tough times test any and all relationships. Especially when you are in ICU. So, confessing I am an imperfect person, I'm thankful for a wife who preaches Law and Gospel. Someone who helps me by telling me how it is...who tells me when I'm wrong by the Word and reminds me I'm forgiven by that same Word.

July 28 is our anniversary. When is yours? This year let's thank God for spouses who preach! Thanking God for helpmates who preach our help is in the Lord.

+To God be the Glory.

The Lord God said:

"It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."<sup>u</sup>

Genesis 2:18

## Day 18: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"Having been declared righteous, then, by faith, we have peace toward God through our Lord Jesus Christ." -Romans 5:1

Ever been through rehab?

Hip? Knee? Back? Heart? Lungs?

Rehab is a process. Sometimes a long, very long, extremely long process.

Treadmill, bike, weights, resistance bands, exercise ball, pool, ice, heat, ibuprofen...

Saint Nick (Coach Nick Saban for those not from Alabama) is famous for saying, "Trust the process."

Thankfully, being "right" with God, or good with God, is not a process. You are not "made" right with God, as if it is a ten step program.

You are "declared" right with God.

Do you see the difference? Made vs. Declared.

Made puts the emphasis on us. Declared puts the emphasis on Jesus.

When the Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel, the moment we come to faith, we are no longer enemies but a friend of God.

This isn't a work in progress. Jesus doesn't stand next to the treadmill of sanctification with a holiness stopwatch timing us to see if we qualify for the crown of life.

Forgiveness, life and salvation is the work of Jesus - not our work. Faith receives these gifts.

Yes, before others we are a work in progress. Learning how to love. Making amends. Processing how to be more Christ like to each other. Our good works are like the stock market. Sometimes bearish and sometimes bullish.

But before God our status is a done deal. Not potentially a Christian, but actually a Christian. Not progressively a Christian, but certainly a Christian.

When Jesus died in your place a judicial decree was DECLARED! You are a forgiven child of God. A Great Exchange took place at the cross. You gave Him your sin. He gave you His holiness. Jesus said, "It is finished."

Jesus took your sin and He is not giving them back. That is the judgement. That is the decree. So it is written, so it is done.

When you look at yourself in spiritual rehab, you rightfully wonder how God could love the mess you have made. But when you look at what Jesus has done for you, how can the Father not love you?

Take comfort in knowing your status before God is not a process. Jesus is not a physical therapist or sports trainer tracking your progress to see if you are cleared to get back into the game of life.

Take comfort in knowing the Father is a Gift Giver. Rejoice that He gifts you with righteousness and holiness. Not by being "Made in America" but "Declared in the Kingdom of God."

+To God be the glory.

having been  
DECLARED  
RIGHTEOUS  
we have peace  
toward God  
THROUGH  
OUR LORD  
Jesus Christ.

ROMANS 5:1



## Day 19: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not in your own understanding." - Proverbs 3:5

Let's play one quick round of the game "Would You Rather."

Would you rather be independent or dependent? Pretty easy, huh? Independent! Right? Of course!

Once exiting the womb until entering the tomb our lives are spent striving and seeking to be independent. Even the sunset years of our life are a struggle to be as independent as possible. Ever try to take the car keys away from your elderly mother or try to convince your aging father to move into an assisted living facility?

We are conditioned by the kingdom of this world to be independent. But is that the goal in the Kingdom of God? What if God's goal for you in life is different? What if God's goal for you in life is to be dependent on Him?

When the disciples were sent out to preach and teach Jesus told them to take no bag, no money, no food. Why? Jesus wanted them to learn to trust in Him.

When the 5,000 had no food Jesus tested the disciples by telling them to feed the masses. Why? Jesus wanted them to see they needed to look away from themselves and lean on Him to feed the crowd with only 5 loaves and 2 fish.

We can't always answer the "why" questions in life. But we can answer the "who" question. Who do we turn to? Jesus. Only Jesus. Jesus is the answer to the question of "who."

Peter answered the question: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You only have the words of eternal life."

Scripture is a testimony, witness, and account given to us, to encourage us, to be dependent on the Lord.

The Lord can turn curses into blessings by using even difficult circumstances in this life. How? Through every situation we can learn to turn away from leaning on our own understanding and trusting in Him.

Perhaps, this is why the Lord leaves us, at times, with nothing else in this life but Him, so that we see He is all that we need.

This is a reason why Paul said, "Rejoice in the Lord always." Not that his lot in life was necessarily pleasurable or enjoyable - but He trusted that the Lord could use the struggle to grow in grace and dependence! Reasons for rejoicing!

Dependence is scary because you have to trust in the caretaker. And life experience has taught us that no one can truly be trusted. But Jesus is different. Jesus is the only God to climb a cross for you!

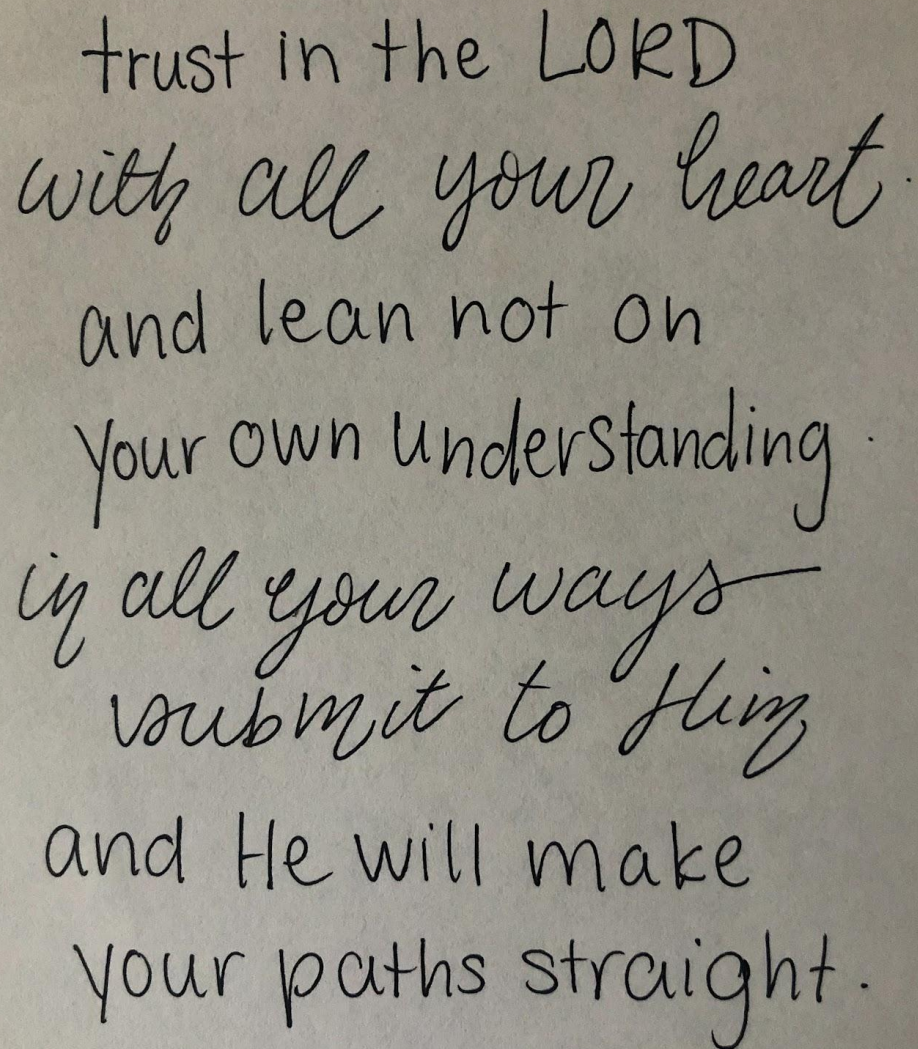
There are so many blessings in this life when you learn to be dependent. For example, you will be a more generous person. When your goal is independence you have to hang on tight to all that you have and all that you own, because those possessions are what make you independent. But if your goal is

dependence? Well, you can let go of what you have been given by God to serve others because you already trust He will provide. Ironically, generous people are dependent people. Stingy people are independent people.

So, would you rather be independent or dependent? In the Kingdom of God the answer isn't a no-brainer. It takes prayer, study, reflection, and more prayer. The correct answer is dependent.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not in your own understanding."

+To God be the glory



trust in the LORD  
with all your heart.  
and lean not on  
your own understanding.  
in all your ways  
submit to Him,  
and He will make  
your paths straight.

Proverbs 3:5-6

## Day 20: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." -Acts 16:31

How strong is your faith? Let's use a scale of 1-10. How do you rank?

Are you a Doubting Thomas? Are you a little mustard seed? Or will you be inducted into the 'Faith Hall of Fame' in Hebrews 11?

If you are like me, you might find yourself all over the place. Sometimes you're walking on water and sometimes you're drowning in the sea.

When times are tough and rough others might be encouraging you to give up on your faith. Remember Job's wife: "Let's just curse God and die."

But like Job you hang on to the Lord. Remember Job's response: "Although the Lord slays me, I will hope in Him."

You hang on by a thread.

But is the thread strong enough? Is the thread of faith enough to save you?

Here is a statement that will shock you, but when the shock is over it will comfort you!

You are not saved by your faith.

You are saved by the object of your faith.

Jesus saves. Not you.

Saving faith is not like a video game where you progress from one level to the next.

Thankfully, Jesus is always bigger than our faith.

Our Christian life is found in "looking unto Jesus." (Heb. 12:2) Not in looking to our own faith.

The saving power is not in the faith but in the God in whom faith relies.

Often, I use silly little illustrations with Confirmation students. I tell them they can dial 811 and have all the faith in the world the police will come, but we all know no one will show. Why? Misplaced faith.

You can dial 911, even with some fear and trembling, but the police will show.

Why? The object saves! Faith receives.

As we battle throughout our lives, the knowledge of Christ's certain power frees us to take our eyes off ourselves. Confessing our lack of faith, we cling to the sure and certain promise of His finished work on our behalf.

Oddly enough, it is easy to turn faith into a good work and fall right back into the pit of works righteousness.

To those of you who feel like your faith is frail and fleeting no matter how hard you try - take heart!

Even a faith as small as a mustard seed moves mountains!

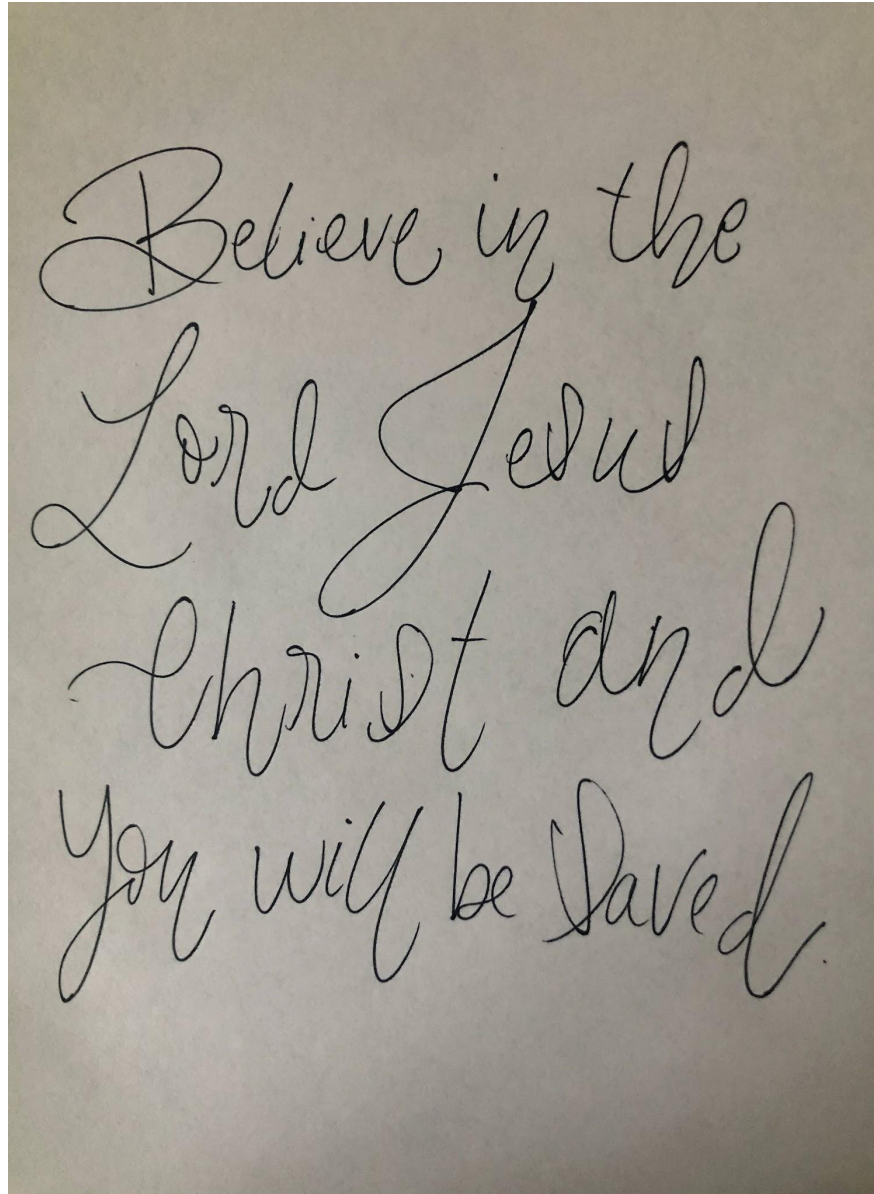
Faith does not save. Faith in Christ saves!

Believe and be saved? No. "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved!"

To those who have been tested by God and know how strong and weak faith can be, this is a sweet sentence!

+To God be the

glory!



Believe in the  
Lord Jesus  
Christ and  
you will be saved.



## Day 21: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"So do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope." - I 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."

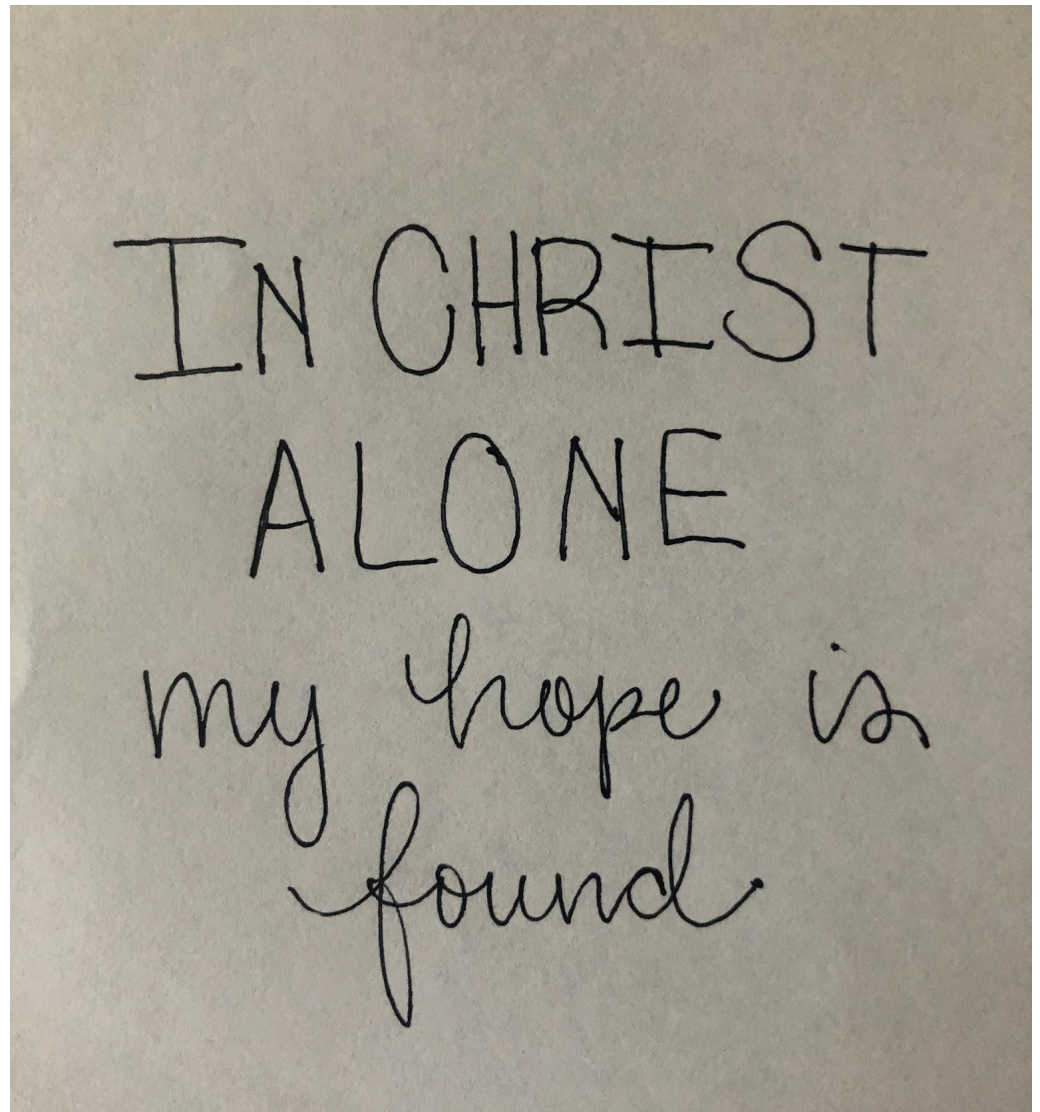
Only Jesus brings hope.

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."

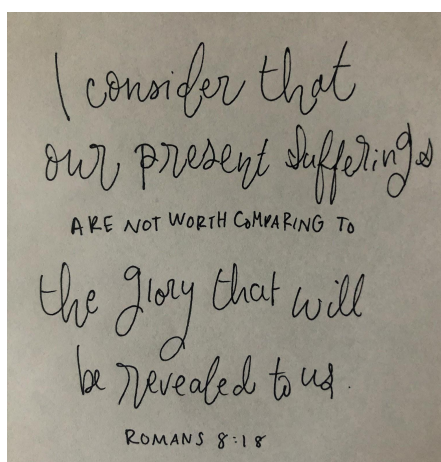
Sometimes it might seem like faith in Jesus is just pounding sand. Is it worth it?

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

Jesus vs. Sufferings?

Jesus wins everytime.

+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.

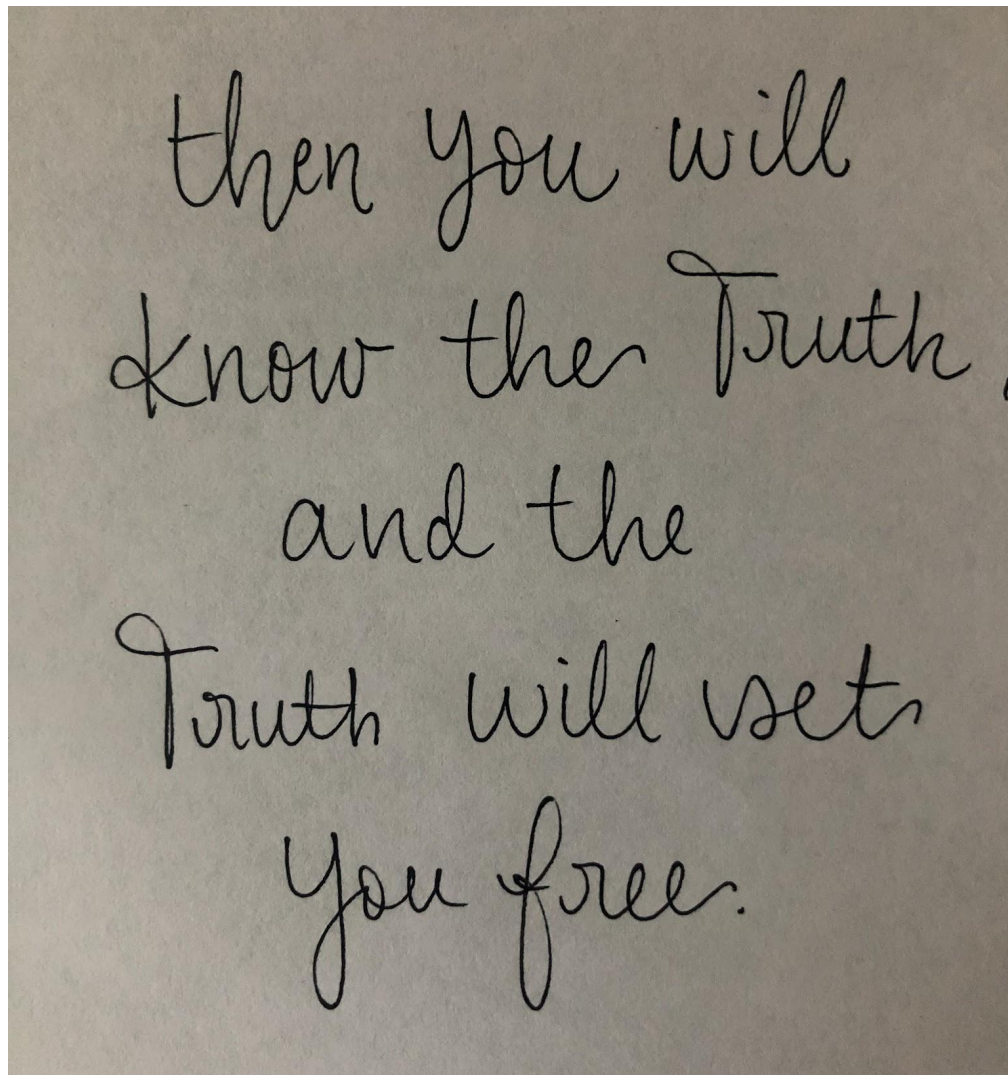
Talk to someone in the trenches who lives out the grace of Christ and ask them about the gospel?

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



then you will  
know the Truth,  
and the  
Truth will set  
you free.

## 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 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 have 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.

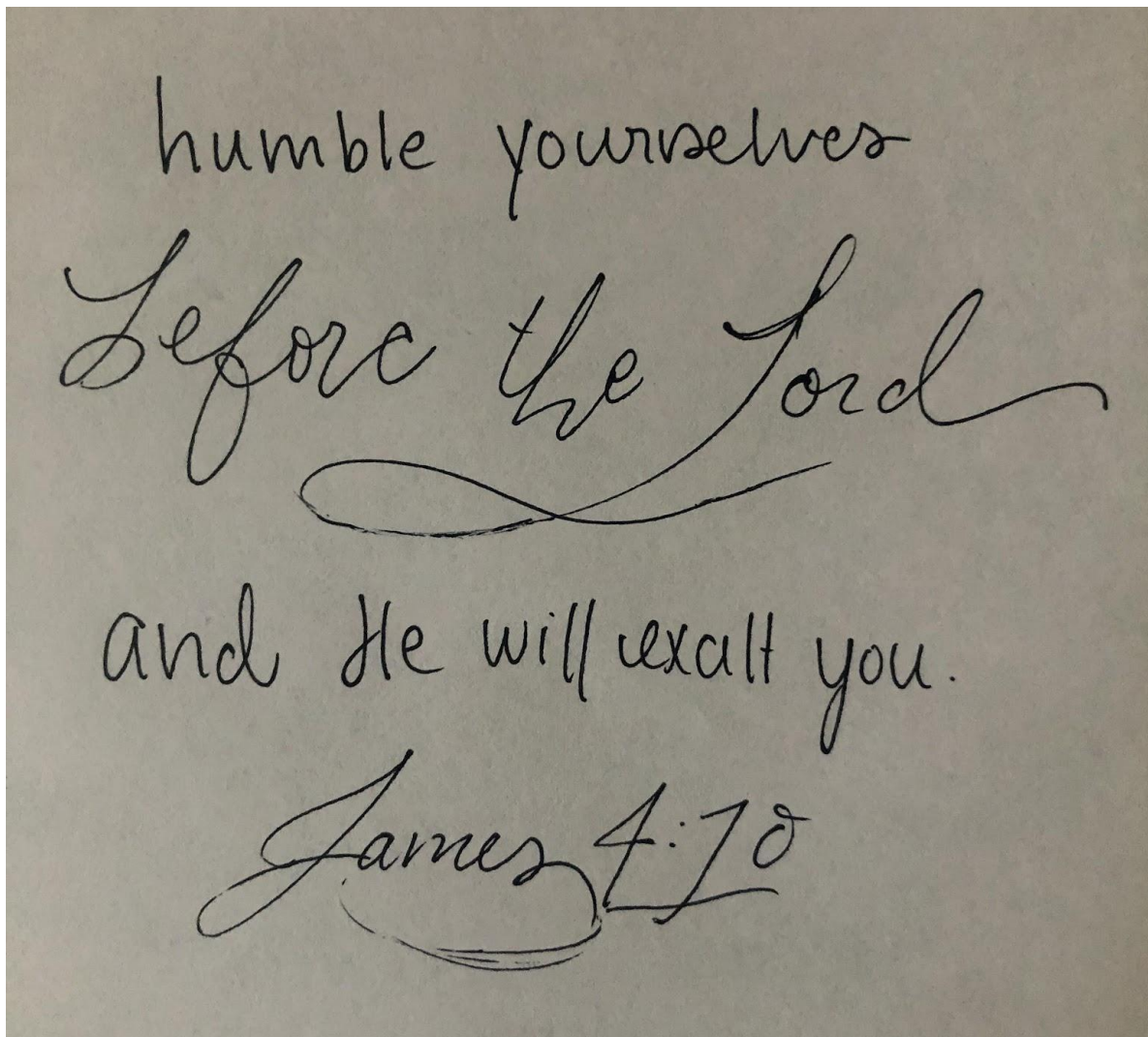
So, the unsolved mysteries are used by God to point us to the ultimate solution.

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

A photograph of a piece of paper with the words "Let us Run with Endurance" written in a large, flowing, cursive script. The ink is dark, and the background is a light, textured surface. The text is arranged in three lines: "Let us Run" on the top line, "with" on the middle line, and "Endurance" on the bottom line. The word "Endurance" is particularly large and spans most of the width of the paper.

## 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.

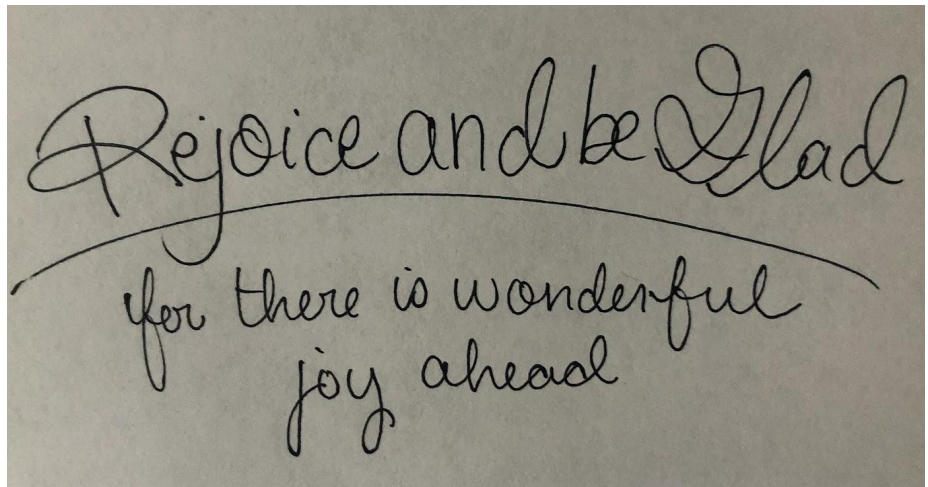
What a gift!

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.

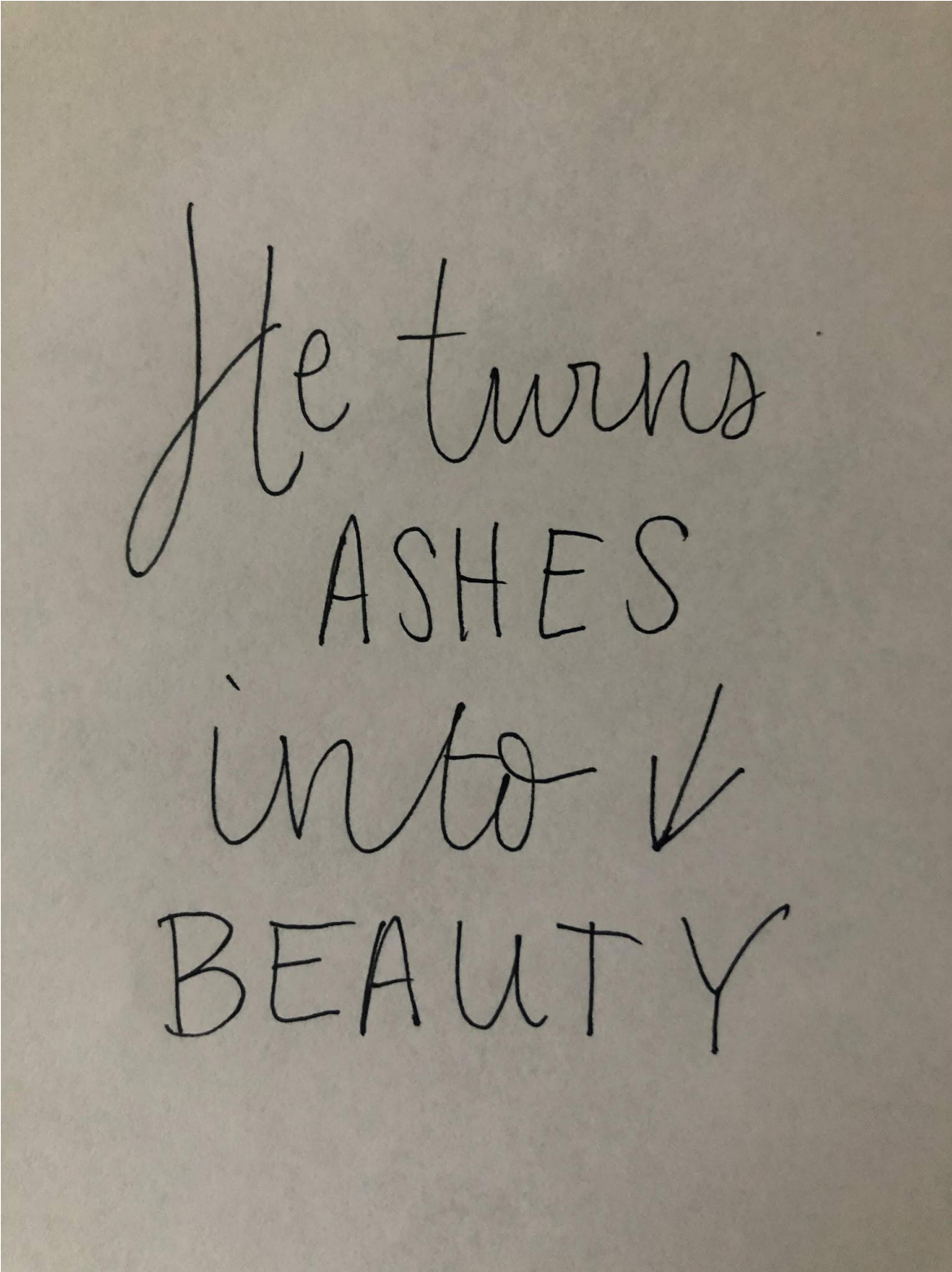
Don't take My word for it, but take His Word for it.



"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



He turns  
ASHES  
into ✓  
BEAUTY



## 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 sports car. 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 a 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.

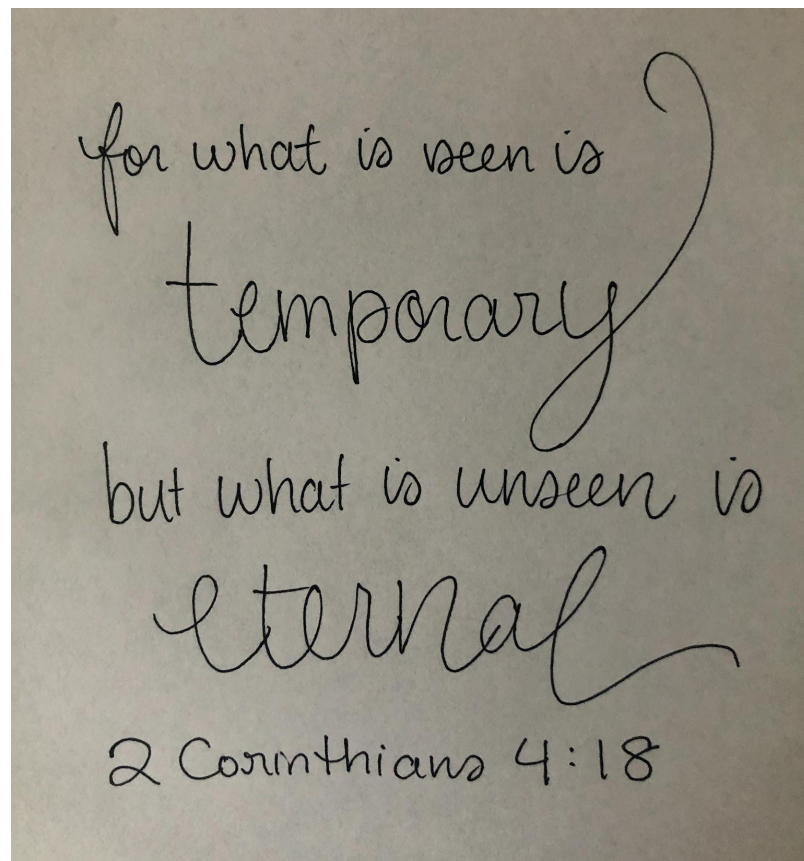
Put it to the test! Your worries? Your fears? Your disappointments? Your time?

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.

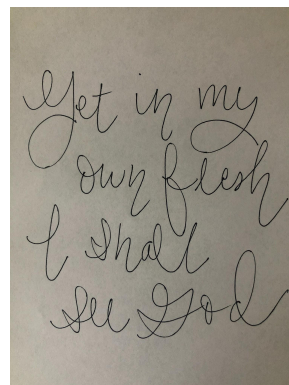
Tim Keller in his book on suffering puts it like this concerning Christianity: "Why were Christians so different? It was not because of some distinctive in their temperament-they were not simply tougher people. It had to do with what they believed about the world. The Christian approach to pain and evil 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 worldly 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!

My Grace is Sufficient  
for You. My power  
is made perfect  
in your weakness.

2 corinthians 12:9

## 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.

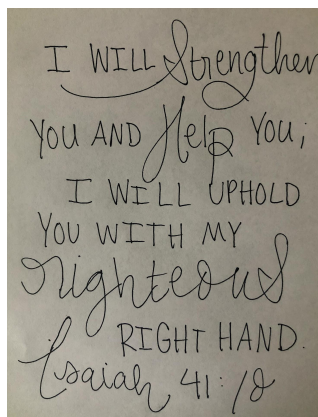
Sure, your trouble is no laughing matter. So cast your troubles on Him, trusting He will uphold you with His own right hand.

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!



A photograph of a piece of paper with handwritten text in black ink. The text is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style. It reads: "I WILL Strengthen", "YOU AND Help You;", "I WILL UPHOLD", "YOU WITH MY", "righteous", "RIGHT HAND.", and "Isaiah 41:10". The word "Strengthen" has a long, flowing underline. The word "righteous" is written in a larger, more decorative script. The word "RIGHT HAND." is in all caps. The reference "Isaiah 41:10" is at the bottom.

## 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  $70 \times 7$  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.

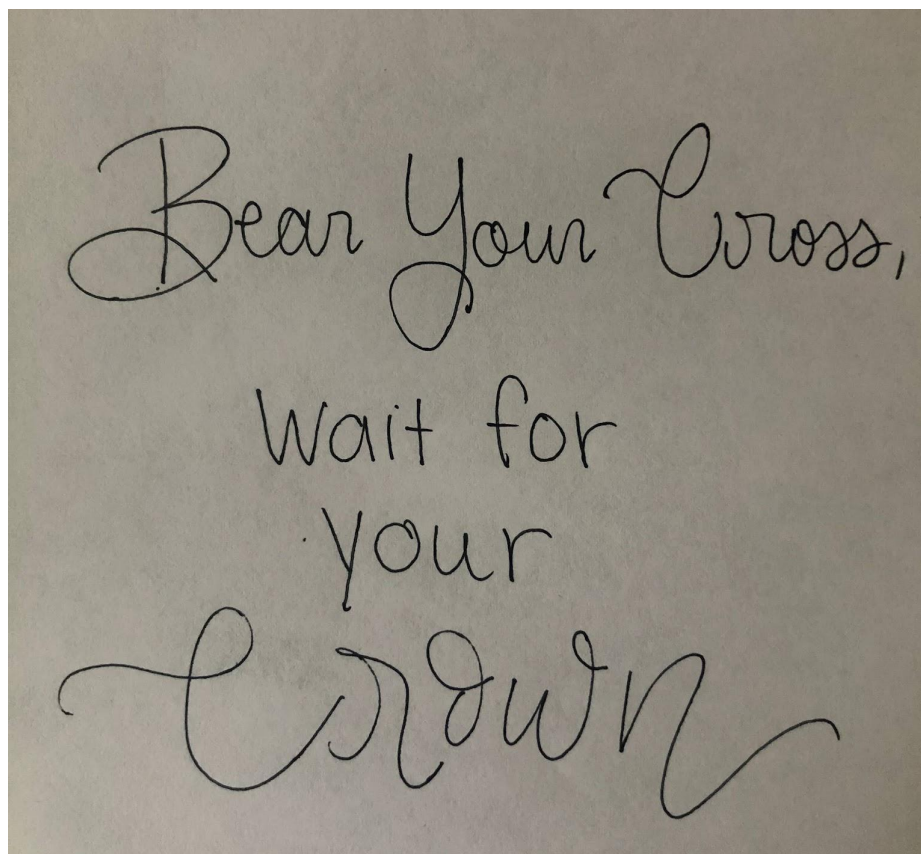
Oddly enough, your thorn might remain to protect you. To drive you into the arms of your Savior.

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 jaw dropping. 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

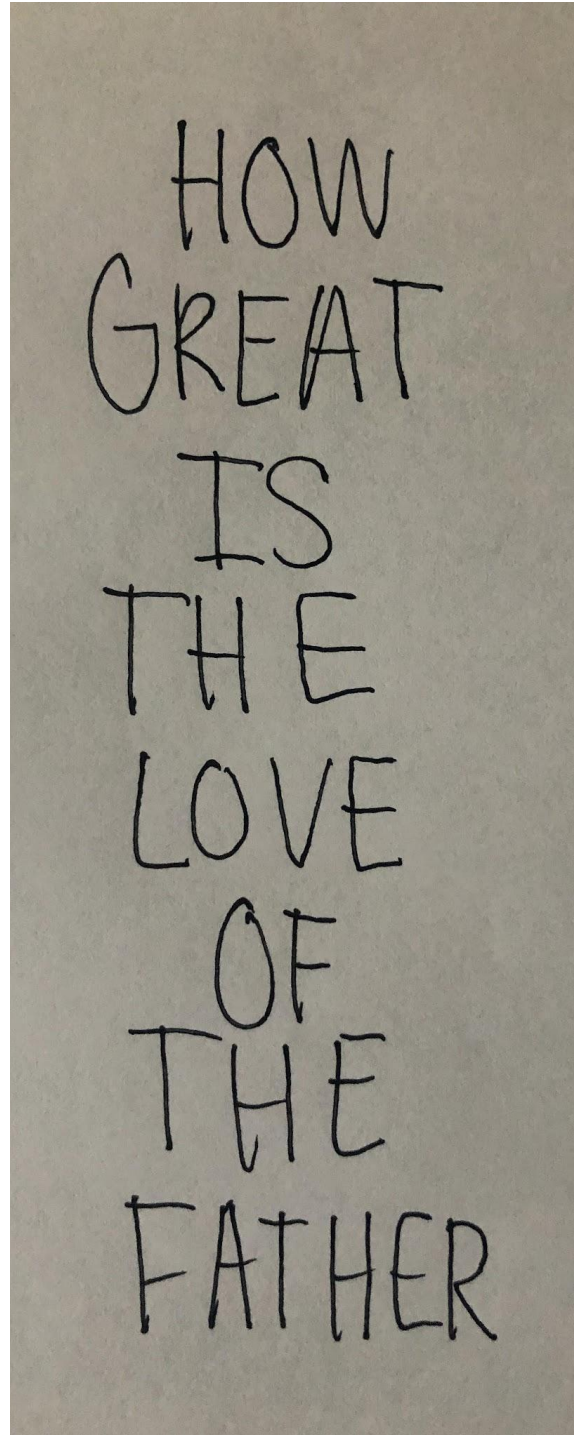
The life and ministry of Jesus can never fully be appreciated.

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 open 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.

So 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 Sistine 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."

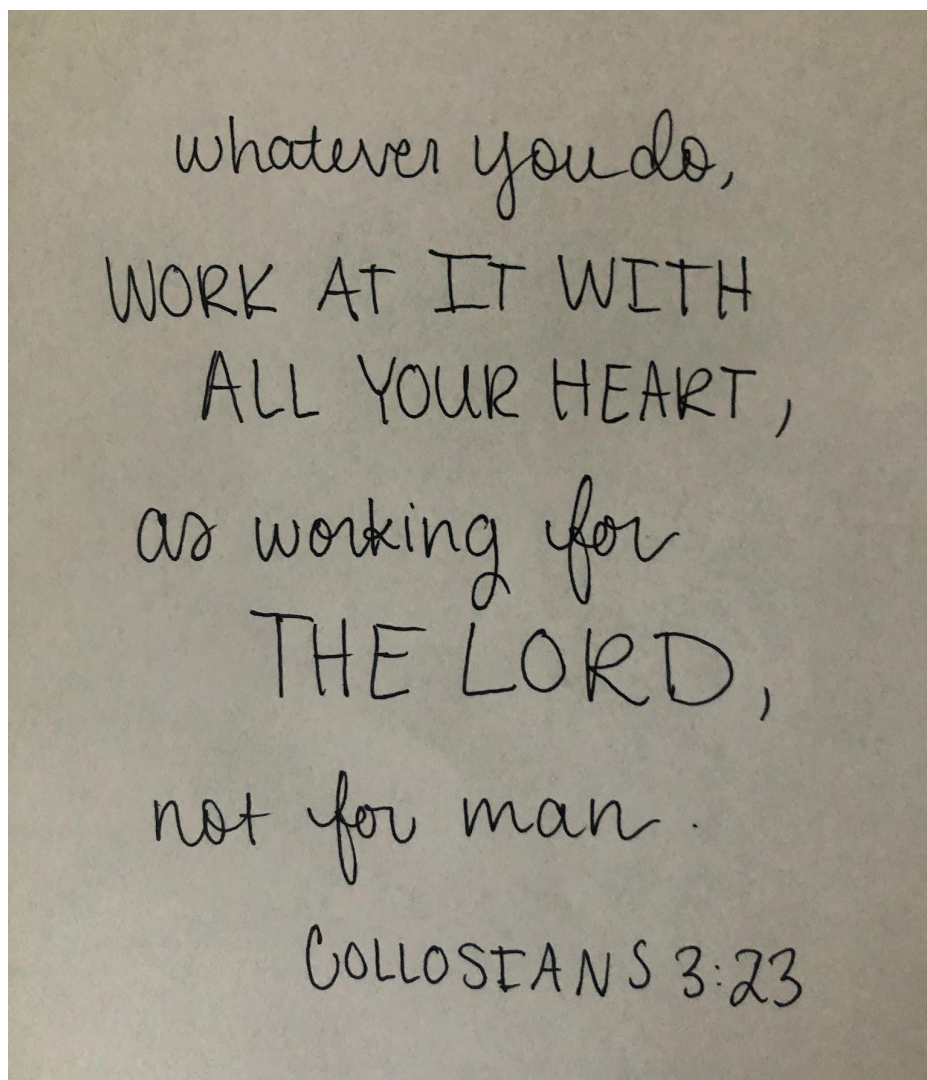
You are the hearts and hands of Jesus in that place. That is your morning motivation.

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!

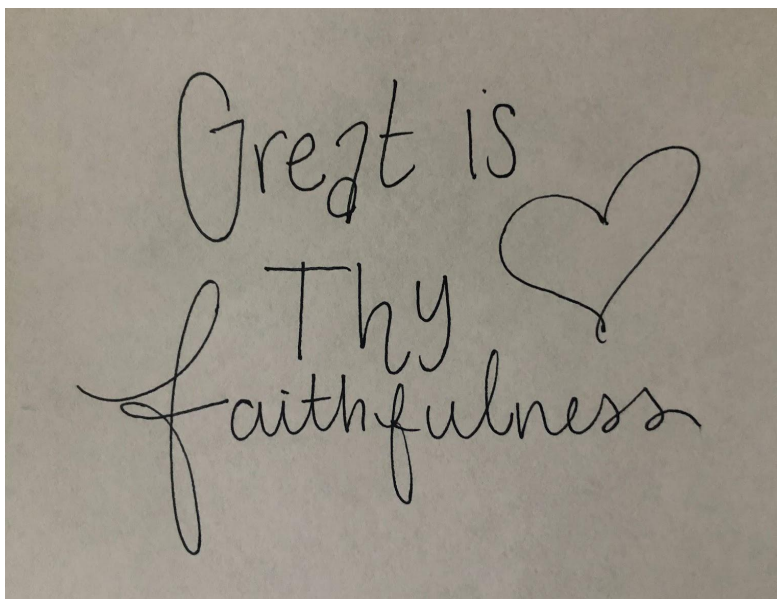
The uncertainty of tomorrow need not be negative. But new opportunities for us to be faithful in His promises.

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!



## Day 36: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"Jesus answered, 'Were not ten cleansed of leprosy? Where are the nine?'" -Luke 17:17

How many Old Testament idols can you name?

Let's see...

\*Baal. The god of the Canaanites.

\*Dagon. The god of the Philistines.

\*Chemosh. The god of the Moabites.

Can you name an idol in our everyday life?

Let's see...

How about an idol named, Normal.

Remember the Sunday School story when Jesus cleansed 10 lepers? We recall that only one returned to give thanks and glory to God.

Why?

I think it has everything to do with the idol called: Normal.

What do we want more than anything when we experience setbacks, sickness, or suffering?

Normalcy!

We just want life to return to normal.

We covet and crave for life to go back to our normal daily routines and rituals.

I think the nine lepers who went on their way without acknowledging Jesus simply succumbed to the idol worship of Normalcy.

So overjoyed that their suffering had ended they began worshipping the creation over the Creator.

Finally, they could be just like everyone else. Kiss their wife. Hug their kids. Sleep in their own bed. Go out to their favorite restaurant. Walk their dog in the park. Hang out at the pool.

How extraordinary is the ordinary when it is taken away! So when the Son of God gave them back normalcy, the temptation was just too great. Mammon was too much. Too much to even just stop for a moment and say thanks to God. So off they went chasing the idol of normalcy, leaving Jesus in the dust and the rear view mirror.

I have to be honest. I too have found myself dabbling in idol worship over the course of the last few months. I just want to live a normal life so bad that I've missed the blessings around me. I focus on what I don't have instead of what I do have. I'm blinded by what has gone wrong that I miss what has gone right. I want so bad certain gifts from God that I can easily turn from God in my obsession to chase the wind. In the absence of normal I've missed at times the presence of Christ.

Maybe you can relate? Maybe you too have bowed a knee to the idol of Normal. Maybe you too have worshipped the gifts rather than the Giver.

In this fallen world, there is no such thing as normal. Normalcy was lost in the first paradise of Eden and will not be fully restored until the final paradise of heaven. It is a chasing after the wind.

Jesus never instructed us to pray, "May normalcy be done."

Jesus moves us to pray, "Thy will be done."

I know. Believe me, I know! Nothing is more aggravating in a day like a schedule gone bonkers and berserk!

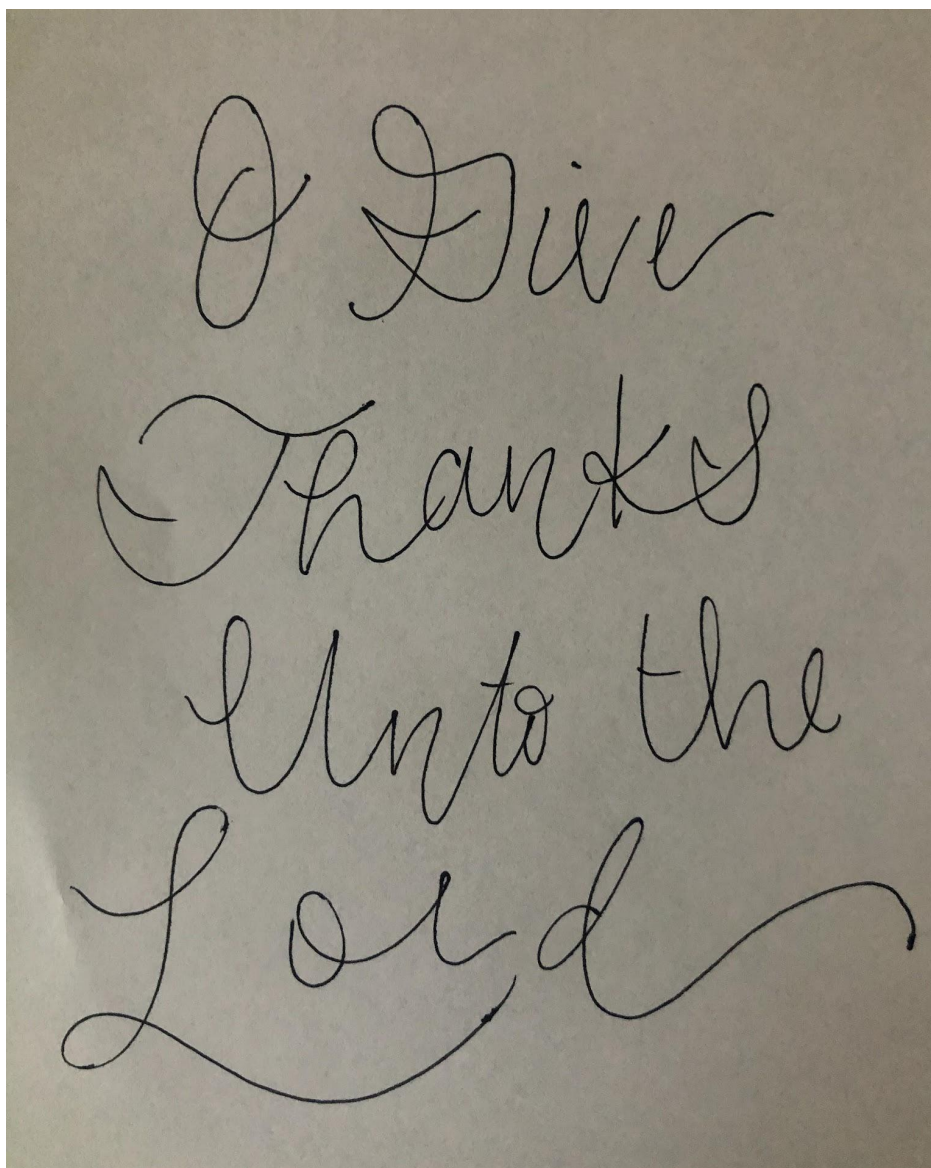
But it is OK. Hang in there. Hang tight.

It might actually be good, or Godly.

After all, our faith is not in the false idols of Normalcy. Our trust is in the Lord.

Are you part of the nine? Or are you the one who returned to give thanks and praise to the Lord?

+To God be the glory!





## Day 37: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him?" - I Corinthians 2:11

You want to watch a husband and wife fight like cats and dogs?

You want to watch brothers fight like Cain and Abel?

You want to watch a functional family become dysfunctional?

Easy! Just judge the heart.

I'm not talking about the fruit of faith. We can judge the fruit according to the standard of God's Word.

But you will drive your loved one bananas when you question the motive of their actions!

When a loved one is sick it changes life for spouses, family and friends. Not just the one receiving care but also for the one giving care.

And love comes in many, many different flavors. Maybe just as many as Baskin-Robbins' famous 31 different flavors.

Consider the following:

Sometimes the caregiver needs to push when the care receiver wants to be pulled.

Tough love vs. Tender love.

Which one? And when? How?

Is it time to be patient or is it about time for a sense of urgency?

Should I just listen or do I need to say something?

Do I make them do it on their own or do I continue to do it for them?

And a whole lot more....

Loving someone is never easy. Giving love is not easy. Receiving love, especially if it is not our favorite flavor, is also not easy. It's one of the reasons why repentance is hard to swallow. It's not on the menu or palate of the Old Adam's taste buds!

Our relationships in a sinful world are already challenging.

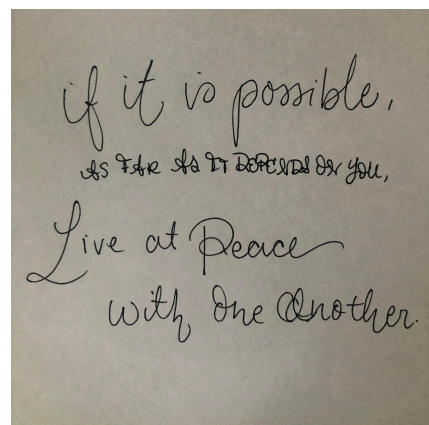
Ascribing motives and judging the heart just makes the challenging even more of a challenge.

Maybe you and your loved one can agree on one thing. Less judging the heart and more grace given and received from the heart.

Our Father in heaven is a God of long-suffering. His children can also, by His Spirit, be forbearing in grace even when they might not always agree on the flavor of the love that needs to be dished out.

Give a little grace to your loved one. It goes a long way!

+To God alone be the Glory!



## Day 38: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"Scripture cannot be broken." - John 10:35

We all know a comfortable pillow can give you sweet dreams. We all know a night at a bad hotel can cause you to toss and turn, beating your pillow to death, giving you nightmares.

Dear Christian! The authority of Scripture is the pillow on which you find your rest. Your peace. Your comfort.

The authority of Scripture is the pillow of the worn and weary.

It is the pillow of the deathbed.

It is the pillow of the sickbed.

It is the pillow of those exhausted by the dangers, toils, and snares of this world.

Knowing that the promises of God revealed to us in Scripture cannot be broken is our great confidence. Knowing that the salvation plan of a gracious God recorded in the Bible is inspired, inerrant, and infallible is our great comfort.

What happens if you believe the Bible is the word of man? What happens if you believe the Bible is anything less than the full word of God? What if you believe the Bible is lore or legend, fable or fiction, myth or tale? What if you believe the Bible has errors?

You have nowhere to rest your head!

But if the promises of God are sure and certain you can have peace at the last!

Pastors, encourage one another to preach on the authority of Scripture!

Laypeople, encourage your pastor to preach on the authority of Scripture!

The person facing trials and troubles is not looking for a question mark, but an exclamation mark. Not a cup half full, but the promise that the cup overflows!

The authority of Scripture is not some academic exercise. It is not some archaic dogma. It is not about conservative vs. liberal or traditionalist vs. progressive.

It is the pillow on which the pilgrim rests.

Read the account of Jacob's Dream in Genesis 28. Otherwise known as Jacob's Ladder. Jacob placed his pillow under his head. A stone. And he received the sure and certain promise that the Lord would be with him. So he took that pillow, or stone, and set it up as a pillar and called that place Bethel!

Why? Because Jacob believed the promise of God could not be broken.

"Behold, I am with you Jacob and I will keep you wherever you go. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (Genesis 28:15)

Pastors don't leave your people empty handed. Put in their hands the full confidence of the Word of God.

For the ivory tower of theologians who play word games with the inspiration of Scripture are far from ICU.

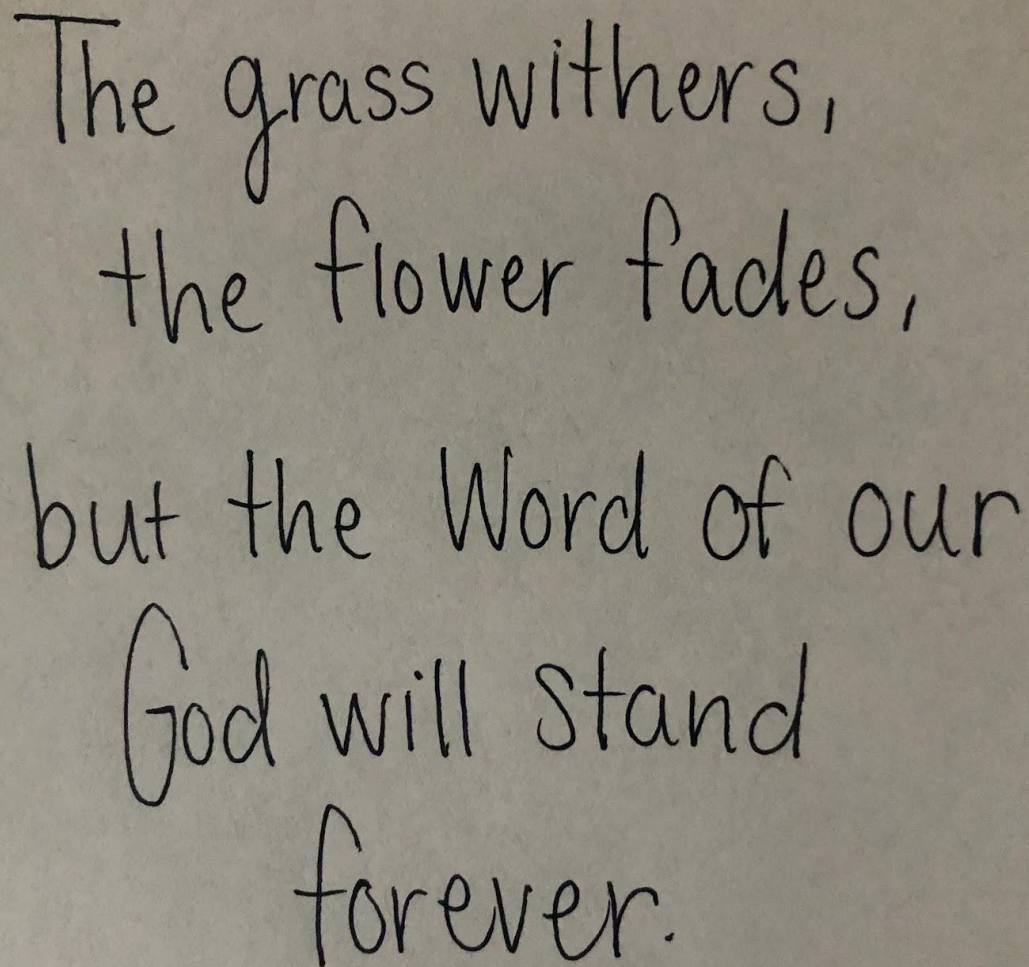
"For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:21)

This promise carries you to the promise of the cross which carries you to life everlasting.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)

Lord, let your servant depart in peace!

+To God be the glory



The grass withers,  
the flower fades,  
but the Word of our  
God will stand  
forever.

## Day 39: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame." -Romans 5:3-5

Our youngest son runs cross country. He came home the other day wearing a classic T-shirt from his coach:

"My Sport Is Your Sports Punishment."

Suffering for the unbeliever serves no purpose. Just an evil we have to face in the game called life. Just like athletic conditioning is a necessary evil to play your favorite game.

Romans! What a letter!

Luther said: "Every Christian should know it word by word, by heart, and occupy himself with it, as the daily bread of the soul."

So, let's look at this verse in Romans word by word by word by word.

Suffering = Endurance = Character = Hope

This is not an audition for the Christian to play the role of the Happy Warrior.

What bothered me the most in my battle with Covid? When someone said: "It is all ok."

My reply: "No. It's not all ok. Look! I'm hooked up to literally a dozen machines! Does this look ok to you?"

So, is Paul the religious fanatic? The out of touch Happy Warrior, walking the halls of the hospital, telling every patient that everything is just fine and dandy? No.

Christians don't rejoice in THE suffering. They rejoice in knowing that God can work THROUGH the suffering. Read Romans 5:3 again. Maybe one more time. After all, the third time is the charm, right?

Paul lays it out there for all eyes to see and all ears to hear. We rejoice in the knowing! The confidence that God is working through the suffering.

Suffering alone produces nothing. Suffering with Christ Jesus produces many things.

Key thought: Our relationship with Christ transforms suffering.

As God leads us through suffering, He teaches endurance, He develops character, and blesses us with hope!

This is sometimes why God doesn't remove the hardship from our life.

When we face the shadows of death? The Lord is working in your life. The Lord never promises that He will take us around, over, or under. In Psalm 23, the Good Shepherd promises He will take us through the shadow of death to the green pastures of life everlasting.

Don't sell God short. Don't act as if God can only work in one way. Your way. Or my way. Or the way of the world. God can bring blessings even out of curses.

Nothing is outside of His handiwork.

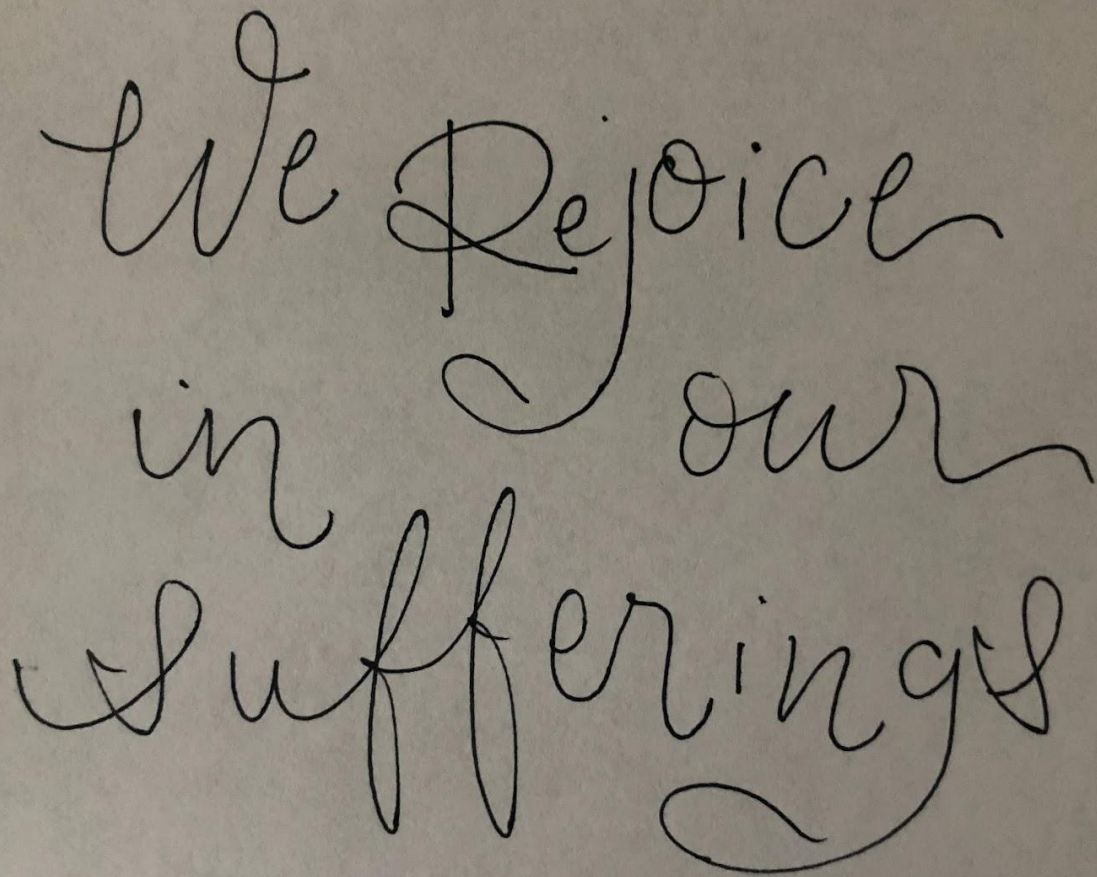
Even suffering.



Enough said. Why?

For you have a hope that doesn't disappoint!

+To God be the glory!



We Rejoice  
in our  
sufferings

A photograph of a piece of light brown, textured paper with the words "We Rejoice in our sufferings" written in a black, cursive script. The paper is slightly wrinkled and the handwriting is fluid and expressive.

## Day 40: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"Who has known the mind of God?" -Romans 11:34

Life.

Filled with the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Why is life filled with the good?

In the silliness of our sinful state we think we know the answer. Drum roll please!

In the folly of our fallen nature we actually believe we deserve the good!

Wrong answer. But it makes sense to the Old Adam. Because this is how the Old Man rolls!

But what about the bad and the ugly? The Old Man wants to know! Even the New Man wants to know! Because inquiring minds want to know!

Like Adam we want to take a taste from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. At the very least, we want to know why the bad and the ugly show up and crash our party called life.

So we ask the age old question: "Why the bad? Why the ugly?" We know the short answer: sin. But we want longer answers. We want answers that satisfy our curiosities. We want answers that we can rationalize and reason. We want answers that make sense to our sensibilities.

But Paul reminds us there is one huge challenge. There is one big obstacle.

Here it is...

"Who knows the mind of God?"

We want more than anything to understand the mind of God!

But have we thought this through?

If we understand God, we have an even bigger problem. And what would that be?

God would not be much of a God!

If God is on our level or we are on His level, we have a puny God! We now have a God who can't even get an "A" on an Algebra I test. We have a God who can't even replace the light bulb. We have a God who can't even remember to pick up milk from the grocery store after being reminded by the wife for the zillionth time.

If the mind of God is on our level, He is no God to be worshipped or praised in the very end!

Part of the comfort for the Christian, oddly enough, is knowing that "His paths are beyond our tracing out" and His judgments are unsearchable. (Romans 11:33)

Knowing that God is above us, brings confidence to the Christian. We need and should want a God whose thoughts and ways are not bound to our thoughts and ways.

Key question: Would our way be the way of the cross? Would our way be the way of grace? Would our way be the way of love for the unlovable? Be honest!

Thank God today that His ways and His thoughts are not ours. For His ways are graciously different! Even in the bad and ugly. Even for the bad and the ugly!

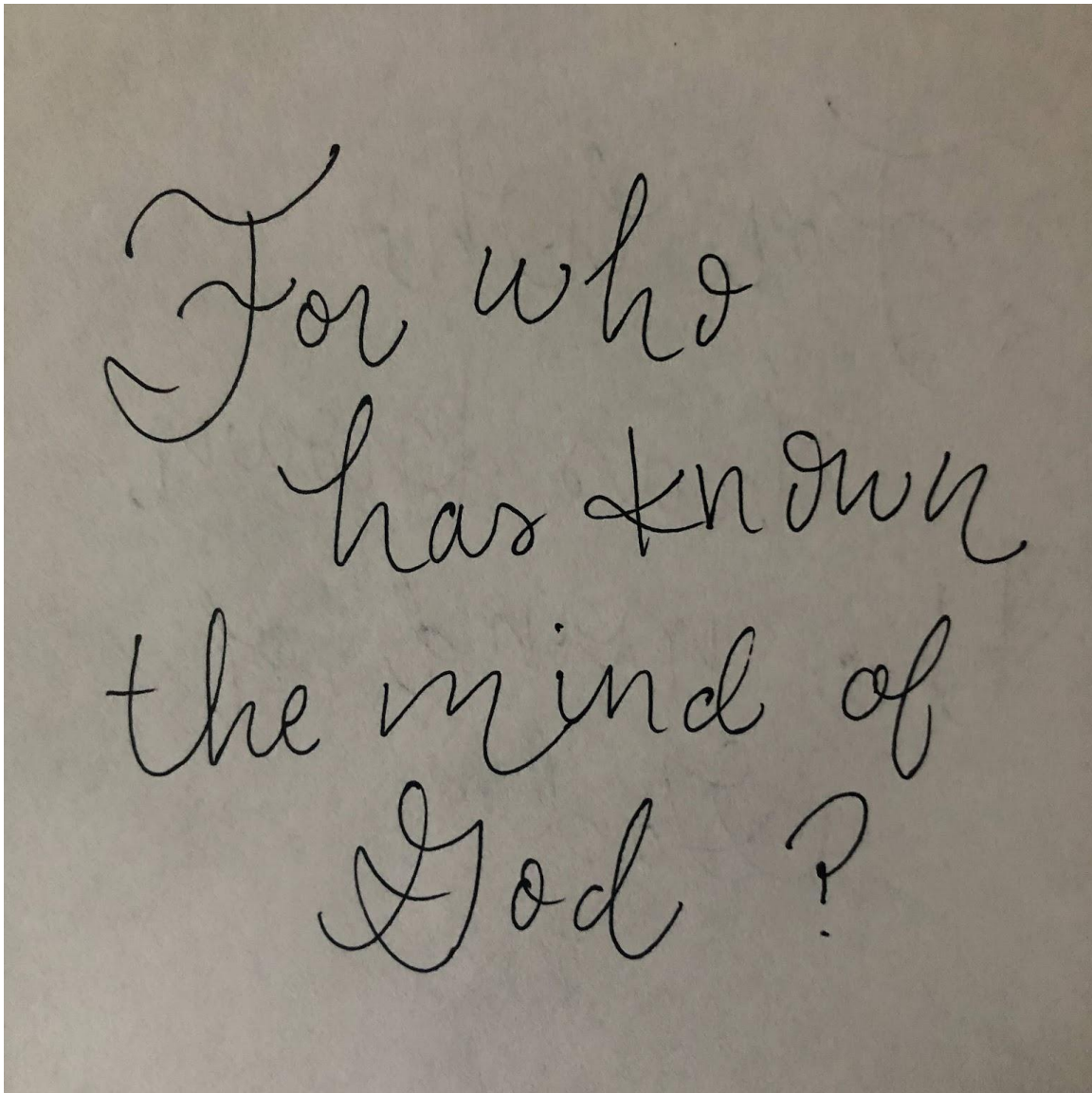
You know the way to the Father. You know in the Father's house there are many rooms and He has gone to prepare a place for you.

Do you know everything? No. But you don't have to know everything. In fact, it might be better if you don't know!

You know enough. More than enough.

For you know Jesus!

+To God be the glory!



For who  
has known  
the mind of  
God ?

## Day 41: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"Lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the age." -Matthew 28:20

She is with the Lord in heaven.

What about when she was here on this earth? Well, the Lord was with her. And she believed it!

She was a dear friend of mine.

As an unwritten rule, pastors should never have favorites. But rules are made to be broken, or so I once heard. And she was a favorite.

She was homebound, more or less, for many years of my ministry here in Birmingham, Alabama.

I loved her dearly.

I loved her faith...in the presence of Jesus.

Let me explain. When you visited her you immediately noticed something. Something, shall we say, "unique."

She talked to Jesus as if He was in the room. She didn't do it every once and awhile. She did it all the time. No matter who was around. You could tell folks were often surprised, stunned, and shocked - and any other synonym that starts with an "s!"

I remember a time when one of our student-pastors (vicars) asked me if she really thinks Jesus is actually in the room with us?

When I told him, "absolutely," I think he was ready to call the seminary to request a new supervising pastor.

I write this pastoral letter to thank this special child of God for teaching me about this promise of Jesus.

"Lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the age."

This was one of those moments when the sheep taught the Shepherd.

Thank you for teaching me that Jesus really is in the room with us.

This verse is not just a catchy cliché.

This verse is not just a pious platitude.

This verse is the truth!

After spending 48 days in ICU...

After more procedures done to me and in me than you can shake a stick at...

After countless sleepless and lonely nights...

Thank you for teaching me that Jesus was in my hospital room.

Just like her, I too started to see Him in the ICU, with the eyesight of faith.

Jesus was by my side.



Jesus is by your side!

This night you are in my prayers. I pray you also can see Him in your room.

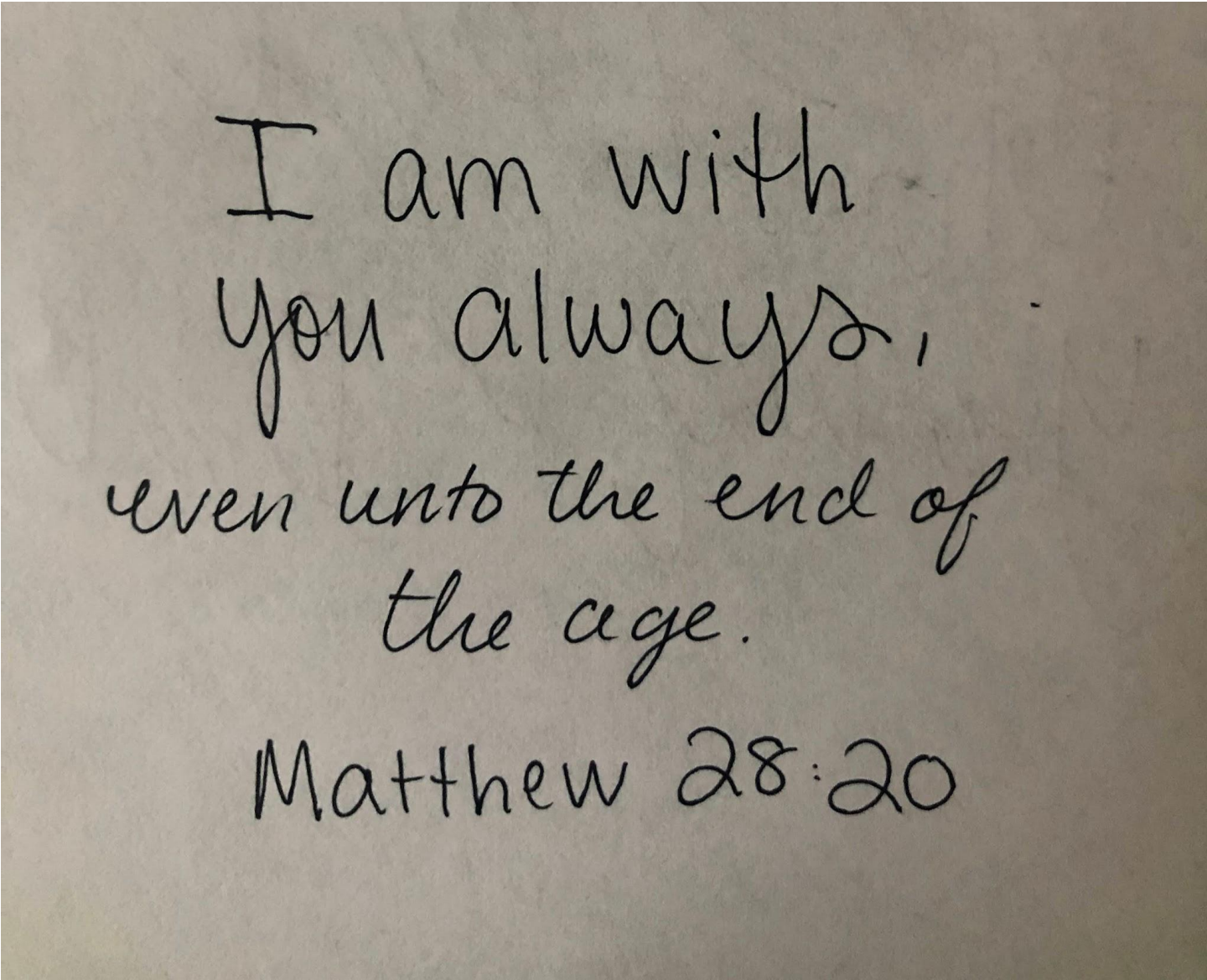
For He will never leave you nor forsake you.

Jesus is with you to the end! Always!

Go ahead. Talk to Him. After all, it's rude to ignore someone in the same room with you.

Especially, if you are a southerner from Alabama. We don't want to give southern hospitality a bad name.

+To God be the glory!



I am with  
you always,  
even unto the end of  
the age.

Matthew 28:20

## Day 42: Pastoral Letters From ICU to You

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus."  
-Romans 8:37-38

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Not a law firm. Not a grunge rock band.

But a band of brothers.

Brothers in faith to the one true God.

These three lived in the land of Nebuchadnezzar and his call to worship a golden statue.

A decree was made that when the "sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music" was heard the people were to fall down and worship the golden image.

Whoever failed to fall down faced the fiery flames of the furnace!

Now you remember! These three are kept alive in Sunday school storybooks. The Three Men are synonymous to the Fiery Furnace just as Daniel is to the Lion's Den or Joseph to the coat of many "colors."

Yes, you remember their fierce faith. But what you might not recall is their faith - no matter the outcome!

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego didn't enter the flames courageously because they knew their earthly fate. They entered the furnace in spite of knowing their outcome!

Let's go back to the actual text for one quick moment...

"O Nebuchadnezzar, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods." (Daniel 3:16-18)

Did you catch that? "But if not..."

There are two sides to a coin. Heads and tails.

There are two sides to faith. In good days and bad days.

Genuine faith trusts God whether He saves us from bodily harm or not!

Even though these three Old Testament disciples were miles from the Apostle Paul in space, place, and time - they lived in the same kingdom - the Kingdom of God.

In this Kingdom there is a promise to all who reside.

Paul promises: "Neither death nor life can separate us from the love of God."

Even if the diagnosis or prognosis of your physical illness is terminal, you are still "more than a conqueror."

On the cross Jesus delivered you!

You cannot lose. In sickness or in health. For there are times when God's rescue vehicle is not the hands of doctors but the wings of His angels to gather us to Abraham's side.

These three brothers of faith faced not only the fiery flames of a furnace, but they also faced the fire of hell itself! Certain the fires had no power over them, they could look at the flames square in the eye no matter how blinding.

No matter the earthly outcome, they knew the eternal outcome. V-day! Victory!

May we too be granted such faith!

+To God be the glory!

