

NOTES ON A THOUGHTFUL REEMERGENCE

A 3rd Coronavirus 7 Day Devotional

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Introduction:

For whatever reason a few weeks ago, I found myself watching a 3-minute YouTube clip on the Space Shuttle Columbia explosion. It was an awful tragedy in American history. As the shuttle reentered, the atmosphere began to break up over Texas. Within a few seconds, all the astronauts were dead, and the shuttle destroyed.

It was awful to remember that situation, but it brought to mind the reality of how hard it is to reenter the space that we are made to exist. From what I understand, if a space shuttle enters that atmosphere on too shallow of a plane, it bounces off and can't penetrate the atmosphere. On the other hand, if it approaches with too steep of descent, there is a chance of it burning up from the added heat. The key to safety is hitting the angle at the exact right place to achieve reentry.

As we get ready to reemerge from COVID-19, this analogy is useful. We can emerge too quickly and end up burned out. Or we could reemerge too slowly and bounce off and fail reentry. I'm not speaking in particular about what decisions the government, CDC, and our health care providers will make. More specifically, I'm talking about us as individuals and families.

During this time of quarantine, we have had the privilege of a hard reset, almost like when you shut down your computer for a few minutes and then reboot it. You have a chance to wipe it clean and bring up the programs that you know you'll use rather than all of the ones that have been running in the background. Similarly, our lives have too many programs running in the background. We aren't functioning at a high level. We're anxious and stressed and busy and tired. Now with the hard reset of our lives, we have the opportunity to be thoughtful.

Here are a few questions that can help as we consider reemerging: What are the things that we want to do differently? What have you missed? What have you not missed? What were you doing out of obligation? Are there new priorities now? How has this process changed you? Who are the relationships we should prioritize? What are the daily rhythms that we should add? What are the events, situations, and obligations we should leave behind?

For example, one of the beautiful blessings of the quarantine is that my family had dinner together almost every night. Usually, because of soccer practice, ballet training, youth group, play rehearsal, committee meetings, etc., we weren't able to eat together except in quick dinners. These are all good things, but they caused our life to become scattered. We've all realized that we desperately need and want to linger over dinner. There is a blessing in taking our time, and even in learning to be bored together.

And what do I want to leave behind? I looked at my calendar for March and April at all the things I had on that calendar that got canceled. What I quickly realized was that only about 20% of them seemed truly important. And only about 30% of them were things I would truly enjoy. The majority of my calendar was filled with other people's needs or a desperate desire to please people for my emotional gain. Those are some of the things I need to leave behind as I prepare to reenter.

I said to our congregation on Easter Sunday morning that I don't want to return to normal. I want to reemerge as more of a new creation of Christ, a creation that seeks to follow God's will rather than the social norms.

Richard Foster said it this way,

“We crave things we neither need nor enjoy. ‘We buy things we do not want to impress people we do not like.’...It is time to awaken to the fact that conformity to a sick society is to be sick. Richard J. Foster, Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth

Let’s not be sick any longer. Let’s return from this quarantine more healthy and whole in every way—physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. But to do this, it will take hard work, and it will also take God’s truth. Over the next seven days, we will study some of the texts where people are reentering into society. Some are reemerging from an exile (Haggai, Nehemiah) or a tragic situation (Adam and Eve, Joseph). Others reenter with a new vision of what life should look like because of the truth of Christ (the Disciples). As always, the writing has been done quickly as other duties have not left my desk. But I have a desire for the readers of this small work to be prayerful and thoughtful about how God is trying to change us for the better.

I probably need to make one more disclaimer. By writing, I’m not advocating for any timeline of reemergence. Different states, communities, and counties will have to make that decision. And no matter what happens, we won’t reemerge the same people. Let’s be prepared to give each other grace for different choices and a little bit more room on the pathway of life

Genesis 3 – Reimagined Vocation

¹⁴ The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.

¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

¹⁶ To the woman he said, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.”

¹⁷ And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;

¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.

¹⁹ By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

²⁰ The man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. ²¹ And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.

²² Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—” ²³ therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. ¹

We come first to Genesis 3. This passage should help us to think about an energized vocation. Adam and Eve were initially put in the garden to care for it and subdue it. Even before the fall, there was work to be done. Work isn’t a curse of the fall but part of what God created us to do.

After the fall, when sin entered the world, work became difficult (v. 19), and so did childbirth (v.16). All of us are feeling the curse now. Disease, death, labor, and pain are all of the results of Adam and Eve not trusting God in the garden (and us with them).

It’s always been the problem that humanity is a little too big for its britches. We have issues with humility, self-sufficiency, and autonomy. When God put a tree in the garden and told us not to touch that tree, He wasn’t trying to play tricks. He was trying to confirm if we loved Him for Him or for the things he gives us. Adam and Eve were too big for their britches (even though they didn’t have any at this point). Pride comes before the fall. As a result of our sclerotic hearts, there is now enmity between the offspring of the Serpent and the offspring of the woman.

Genesis 3:15 is one of the first indications of the good news of Christ. It’s called the proto-evangelic or the first gospel. Here it states the problem and the solution. Since the problem is between God and man, God would have to become a man. He would enter the childbirth process himself to come into this

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ge 3:14–24). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

world and conquer Satan. That's why it says in v. 15 he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.

The ramifications of Genesis 3 still stand. By the sweat of our brow, we eat. Life is but dust, and to dust, we shall return. Now, more than ever, we've started to realize that life is a mist. It's a painful but helpful truth. It reminds us to take each day seriously, but at the same time, to live with more of a *Joie de Vive*. We need this perspective to make our recalcitrant hearts supple again.

There's also the kindness of God in this passage. Before the fall, Adam and Eve were naked and felt no shame. Now they feel the shame; as a result, they make coverings so that no one could see their nakedness. In a great display of graciousness, God himself makes garments and covers the shame of Adam and Eve. The savior of the world becomes a tailor, weaving together his righteousness, salvation, and providence as garments to cover our shame and sin.

Once they are clothed and cared for, Adam and Eve are kicked out of the Garden. It seems like a strange turn of events. Maybe for you, this seems to validate who you think God is—one big meanie who wants us to “not have nice things.” What if it's different than you think? What if God didn't kick them out of the garden to punish them but to protect them? He knows our weakness so well that if we stayed in the garden, we would continue in our disobedience. So now he puts us in the world to extend the mandate of subduing it, working it, seeing its beauty, and tasting its fruit.

So as we emerge, as Adam and Eve did from the ideal of what life, the current challenge is to learn a reimagined vocation. By that, I mean newfound freedom in our calling in life and work.

Some of us see work as a burden or a means to an end. We work to get a paycheck, and that paycheck helps us to buy our recreational tools. Biblically, “work” or “vocation” is a much broader and more beautiful idea. Consider this quote from Amy Sherman:

“Every faithful act of service, every honest labor to make the world a better place, which seemed to have been forever lost and forgotten in the rubble of history, will be seen on that day [at the final resurrection] to have contributed to the perfect fellowship of God's kingdom.... All who committed their work in faithfulness to God will be by Him raised up to share in the new age, and will find that their labor was not lost, but that it has found its place in the completed.” Amy L. Sherman, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good*

It's beautiful to think our efforts as a student, engineer, accountant, lawyer, mechanic, florist, or hairdresser is a part of faithfulness in building a new Kingdom. Students are deprived of school (except online), and maybe for the first time in the history of the world, our students are ready to get back to school—reimagining it with gratitude and excitement. We are deprived of work and the “water cooler” or coffee pot. Perhaps now, the water cooler will be reimagined to be a place of encouragement rather than gossip. Maybe we can imagine our vocation afresh and our calling to make this world beautiful. Could this help us return with more gratefulness and kindness? What if employees honor our bosses? What if the good desire to make a profit is mitigated with fairness and integrity?

When we reemerge, we have much to leave behind, two things, to be exact. First of all, we must make sure that we're not looking too much at work. Up to this point in American society, a large portion of us has become workaholics. We've kept our families underdeveloped and our friendship shallow because

of the number of hours we spend trying to get “ahead.” And instead of living in our means, we use theology to justify an overemphasis on work. Consider what this writer said in the New York Times:

Techies here have internalized the idea — rooted in the Protestant work ethic — that work is not something you do to get what you want; the work itself is all. Therefore any life hack or company perk that optimizes their day, allowing them to fit in even more work, is not just desirable but inherently good.²

For far too long, we have justified our overemphasis on work. But we also need to leave behind a view of vocation that understands work only as a means to the end. In other words, we work only to have resources for recreation and pleasure. On this side, consider what Tim Keller says:

“A job is a vocation only if someone else calls you to do it for them rather than for yourself. And so our work can be a calling only if it is reimagined as a mission of service to something beyond merely our own interests. Thinking of work mainly as a means of self-fulfillment and self-realization slowly crushes a person.” Timothy Keller, Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God’s Work

What if we come out of this quarantine with a reimagined vocation? Work is not just working but a “mission of service.” Like the exile from the garden, it will require the sweat of our brow. Life will still be difficult. Childbirth will continue to be painful. Your boss may still be a jerk and your kids self-centered. But maybe we can be reenergized in our vocation to think of it in a more biblical way. Perhaps it would give us perspective and gratitude. Years ago, John Gresham Machen put it this way:

“For Christians to influence the world with the truth of God’s Word requires the recovery of the great Reformation doctrine of vocation. Christians are called to God’s service not only in church professions but also in every secular calling. The task of restoring truth to the culture depends largely on our laypeople. To bring back truth, on a practical level, the church must encourage Christians to be not merely consumers of culture but makers of culture. The church needs to cultivate Christian artists, musicians, novelists, filmmakers, journalists, attorneys, teachers, scientists, business executives, and the like, teaching its laypeople the sense in which every secular vocation—including, above all, the callings of husband, wife, and parent—is a sphere of Christian ministry, a way of serving God and neighbor that is grounded in God’s truth. Christian laypeople must be encouraged to be leaders in their fields, rather than eager-to-please followers, working from the assumptions of their biblical worldview, not the vapid clichés of pop culture.” — J. Gresham Machen

Questions for consideration :

- Have you overemphasized or underemphasized work?
- What would it take for you to reimagine your work to be God-glorifying?
- What needs to change in your vocational or your life patterns to better glorify God and love your family?
- Beyond work, where is life difficult right now? And where are you feeling the effects of the fall?
- Where can you allow God to be your tailor and give you the righteousness to cover your shame?
- How do you feel shameful, and how does the gospel give you a new identity in that he loves you and has covered the flaws in you?

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/26/business/against-hustle-culture-rise-and-grind-tgim.html>

A Prayer for Work

Father,

We come to you knowing that you are a God who cares for us. It's hard to remember, but true. We know it is because the Psalmist proclaims, "Great is the Lord, who delights in the welfare of his servants" (Ps. 35). You delight to see us do well. We are so thankful for your heart.

But if we are honest, a lot of us are scared. We are unemployed, underemployed, furloughed, or frightened that our time might be approaching. We know what it says that "Better is the little than the righteous has than the abundance of many wicked" (Ps. 37) We aren't asking for much, but we need to know it's going to be o.k that we will be able to feed our families and care for our medical bills.

Perhaps, God, you are calling some of us to adjust our expectations. To live in faith, working hard, reimagining our vocation as a calling, and trusting you with the results; rather than chasing the American dream. Keeping up with the Joneses is a chasing after the wind.

So may we view you again, as not only a gracious God but a provider. A Jehovah Jirah. You have always provided for us; there is no reason that your character will change now. But we need to change. We need to see you differently, so we refuse to live in our self-sufficiency. Help us to realize that our joy lies in our dependence upon you.

And make us rich. Not in monetary things (although some will be blessed with this burden). Make us rich in your grace. As it says in 1 Corinthians, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake, he became poor so that you by his poverty might become rich." As people, we are rich in many things. May it primarily be in mercy.

In the name of Jesus, our provider,

Amen and Amen

Genesis 50 – Restored Relationships

Then Joseph fell on his father's face and wept over him and kissed him. ²And Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Israel. ³Forty days were required for it, for that is how many are required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days.

⁴And when the days of weeping for him were past, Joseph spoke to the household of Pharaoh, saying, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, please speak in the ears of Pharaoh, saying, ⁵'My father made me swear, saying, "I am about to die: in my tomb that I hewed out for myself in the land of Canaan, there shall you bury me." Now therefore, let me please go up and bury my father. Then I will return.' " ⁶And Pharaoh answered, "Go up, and bury your father, as he made you swear." ⁷So Joseph went up to bury his father. With him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his household, and all the elders of the land of Egypt, ⁸as well as all the household of Joseph, his brothers, and his father's household. Only their children, their flocks, and their herds were left in the land of Goshen. ⁹And there went up with him both chariots and horsemen. It was a very great company. ¹⁰When they came to the threshing floor of Atad, which is

beyond the Jordan, they lamented there with a very great and grievous lamentation, and he made a mourning for his father seven days. ¹¹ When the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning on the threshing floor of Atad, they said, "This is a grievous mourning by the Egyptians." Therefore the place was named Abel-mizraim; it is beyond the Jordan. ¹² Thus his sons did for him as he had commanded them, ¹³ for his sons carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave of the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place. ¹⁴ After he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father.

God's Good Purposes

¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." ¹⁶ So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: ¹⁷ 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you." 'And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.'" Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. ²¹ So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. ³

One of the things that this quarantine has taught us is the importance of a relationship. I don't know about you, but many of us are longing for our friends that we haven't been able to see, a conversation that we've missed, a laugh that we can't remember the sound of, or a Holy hug from a friend or family member.

As I've said multiple times, relationships are what life is about, so it's good to think about how to restore the relationships that are broken. I've heard many testimonies about how people have connected with family members and long-lost friends during this time. Random zoom meetings, phone calls, texts, and emails are the norm. Why? There's something about this situation that makes us want to connect with others—in part because we're all going through it together. Like sin, we're all experiencing quarantine in this pandemic. As we realize how fragile we are, instinctively, we extend our hands and voices for comfort.

Joseph was a man who knew broken relationships. We typically wouldn't think about him as reemerging into society. He had made his way high up into Pharaoh's courts. However, he only got there through a series of sinful behavior from his brothers.

If you don't remember the story, Joseph was one of Jacob's favorite sons. His brothers were envious of their relationship, so they thought of a ruse to deceive Jacob. They actually plotted to murder Joseph, throw him into a pit, and tell their father a wild animal devoured him. One of the brothers, Reuben, heard this and decided they shouldn't take Joseph's life. Instead, they could sell him to some Midianite traders passing by. You can almost hear Reuben justifying the "lesser" action. It seems so reasonable (in comparison to murder), but they are still selling him into slavery hundreds of miles away.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ge 50). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

I've often wondered what the next years were like for the brothers. Did they ever talk about that day? Were there muffled secrets being shushed when Jacob walked into the room? Or, like many families, did they wordlessly vow never to mention it again. After all, what could they do if they talked about the situation? It seemed irreparable like most broken relationships seem.

If they were convicted, they would have to tell the truth, ask for forgiveness from their father, face the wrath, and then go on a search mission to find and repurchase him—presuming Joseph was still alive and able to be found.

And that's why we usually stop with fractured relationships. Broken messes seem overwhelming to repair. It's easier to not even start the process. The pain and experience are real. Like the pandemic, broken relationships are a shared experience of us all. Thankfully, God's ways are not our ways. He has the ability to not only start the process but to work ahead of us. He prepares good works for us to walk into.

While the brothers fiddled, Joseph rose in power. He became an interpreter of dreams, and he lived in Pharaoh's house. He increased in responsibility and stature while maintaining his integrity (even with the temptation of Potiphar's wife trying to seduce him). He trusted God and became high in the kingdom of Egypt. As an interpreter of dreams, he realized the need to prepare for the famine. And as he prepared in Egypt, in Israel, the famine ensued.

Joseph's brothers were forced to travel to find food. Where did they travel? To Egypt, the place where the Midianite traders had taken Joseph. Without going into the entire story, you can imagine the next chapter. Joseph met his brothers in his courts. He tested them and, through a long series of events, was finally reunited with his father. As we pick up in Genesis chapter 50, Joseph's father Jacob had just died. Joseph wept over his father—not only over his death but over all the years lost.

Now pause and think about the temptation for Joseph. Jacob is dead, and it would be so easy to become bitter and angry and prideful. He's in the place of power and authority; now, he can exact his revenge upon his brothers and make them pay for what they did. Of course, the brothers were scared to death, and that's why they said in v. 15, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil we did." They sent a message to him, misinterpreting the words of Jacob and trying to manipulate Joseph. The message is found in v. 16 and 17.

But something strange happened that day. Evil wasn't repaid with evil. The cycle of sin stopped. Joseph wept.

And, assuming the message in v. 16 and 17 was true, Joseph knew what he had to do. In v. 19, we see a wonderful picture. It's grace given from a Hebrew boy wearing Egyptian clothes. He had spent his entire adult life in Egypt, but he had not forgotten the God of his youth. Joseph said, *"Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones."* He comforted them from a position of power. He spoke kindly to them when he had the upper hand.

For us to restore relationships, we have to give others the grace that God has given to us. It begins by saying, "I'm not in the place of God." Joseph realized that God's sovereignty and providential plan put him in a place of power in Egypt so that he could provide for his family during the famine in Israel. He

could have become bitter over all the years missed, all the things that he could have done in his own family, in his own land. Instead, he chose to see how God might use it for good. What other people have brought for evil in our lives, God can use for good. It doesn't take the darkness away, but it does remind us that God can work around our sin and the sin of others to extend grace.

In the New Testament, there are many "one another" commands. At the risk of laying it on thick, let me list some of these now. If we want to be thoughtful in our reemergence, it might be good to read each one of these slowly. You might want to read one of these with someone else in mind.

Commands on How to Live with One Another

Be at peace with one another ([Mk 9:50](#))
Don't grumble among one another ([Jn 6:43](#))
Be of the same mind with one another ([Ro 12:16](#), [15:5](#))
Accept one another ([Ro 15:7](#))
Wait for one another before beginning the Eucharist ([1 Co 11:33](#))
Don't bite, devour, and consume one another ([Ga 5:15](#))
Don't boastfully challenge or envy one another ([Ga 5:26](#))
Gently, patiently tolerate one another ([Ep 4:2](#))
Be kind, tender-hearted, and forgiving to one another ([Ep 4:32](#))
Bear with and forgive one another ([Co 3:13](#))
Seek good for one another, and don't repay evil for evil ([1 Th 5:15](#))
Don't complain against one another ([Jas 4:11](#), [5:9](#))
Confess sins to one another ([Jas 5:16](#))
Bear one another's burdens ([Ga 6:2](#))
Speak truth to one another ([Ep 4:25](#))
Don't lie to one another ([Co 3:9](#))
Encourage and build up one another ([1 Th 5:11](#))
Stimulate one another to love and good deeds ([He 10:24](#))
Pray for one another ([Jas 5:16](#))
Be hospitable to one another ([1 Pe 4:9](#))

Commands on Loving One Another

Love one another ([Jn 13:34](#), [15:12](#), [17](#); [Ro 13:8](#); [1 Th 3:12](#), [4:9](#); [1 Pe 1:22](#); [1 Jn 3:11](#), [4:7](#), [11](#); [2 Jn 5](#))
Through love, serve one another ([Ga 5:13](#))
Tolerate one another in love ([Ep 4:2](#))
Greet one another with a kiss of love ([1 Pe 5:14](#))
Be devoted to one another in love ([Ro 12:10](#))

Commands on Humbleness / Deference

Give preference to one another in honor ([Ro 12:10](#))
Regard one another as more important than yourselves ([Php 2:3](#))
Serve one another ([Ga 5:13](#))
Wash one another's feet ([Jn 13:14](#))
Don't be haughty; be of the same mind ([Ro 12:16](#))
Be subject to one another ([Ep 5:21](#))
Clothe yourselves in humility toward one another ([1 Pe 5:5](#))

The list can be overwhelming. It can also be inspiring. It's not our job to manipulate or control relationships to get what we need. We ought not to look at them as a means to an end or as an exchange for services, whether physical, emotional, or financial. Instead, we're called to just be the people that God wants us to be.

Of course, we can only do this with God's grace. We don't have the strength or the power in ourselves to make it happen on our own. We, like Joseph, need to see that a sovereign God has placed us where we are. We are not "in the place of God" to judge. We don't have to grow bitter. As one individual has said, "resentment is drinking poison, hoping that the other person dies." Instead, it only kills us.

Now we are to be the temple of God incarnated in the world—to be people who represent God in this Kingdom, a Kingdom of love and forgiveness and incarnation. So as we reemerge and start to reform our relationships, let's think through how we could best restore them through grace. In the end, it will be the only thing that matters.

Robert Farrar Capon rightly points out: *"Jesus' reconciled version of all relationships is the only version that really counts – the only one that in the end will be real at all. When we die, we lose whatever grip we had on our unreconciled version of our lives. And when we rise at the last day, the only grip in which our lives will be held will be the reconciling grip of Jesus' resurrection. He will hold our lives mended, cleaned, and pressed in his hand, and he will show them to his Father. And his Father, seeing the only real you or me there is to see, will say, 'Wonderful! Just what I had in mind.' He will say over the Word's new creation of us at the last day exactly what he said over the Word's first creation of us on the sixth day: 'Very good!'"* Robert Farrar Capon, Kingdom, Grace, Judgment

Questions for consideration

- What are the relationships in your life that are broken?
- Where have you become bitter, angry, resentful, or vengeful?
- How have you tried to live and restore these relationships with your own power?
- Which of the specific "one another" commands convict you?
- Who are two or three people that you can pray for today?
- How can God's sovereignty give you an understanding and trust to follow his plan for relationships as you reemerge?
- Is there a specific situation you can ask God to work together for good?

A Prayer for Relationships

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

You are a Trinitarian God, always in relationship with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You exist in perfect communion. We know you value relationships. You made us to know us and us to know you.

During this time, we have learned a lot about our relationships, especially the ones close to us. We realized what works and found out what is broken. As we have separated from each other, the pain, and longing, to be back together is palpable. Even the introverts among us, at minimum, miss the opportunity to "people watch" with their nose in a book. And the extroverts are chomping at the bit.

Perhaps when we return, things will be different. We are asking Father that you make them this way. We ask that you help us to see you as a Good Father. Take away the unbiblical idea that you are a dictator, a distant deity, or an impotent God who can't do anything. No, you are our good, strong, gracious, and loving Father who rejoices in giving his children good gifts.

And Christ, our you are our King and also our Friend! You have been through everything we will go through in life. You have been tempted in every way, and yet without sin. Now can we see you as the Prince of Peace for us?

Holy Spirit, you are our Counselor and Comforter. You are always with us and unite us to Christ, reminding us, no matter how bad we feel, that we are God's Children.

And we are all your children. So may we care for our brother and sisters well. I pray as we reemerge that we wouldn't use each other as a means to an end. Nor abuse, manipulate, or cajole.

Father, we grieve over the way we have treated our fellow humanity. We are all created in YOUR image, and our sinfulness makes us resort to genocide, racism, pornography, homicide, sexism, and so many other perversions. And even if we don't "do" these actions, we think about them.

God forgive us. Heal us. Comfort us. Protect us. Give us the grace and strength we need to care for others. Make us servants of you and of each other!

Do this by the power of your Spirit, we pray,

Amen and Amen

Haggai 2 –

Renewed Priorities

In the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet: ²“Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to all the remnant of the people, and say, ³‘Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes? ⁴Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the LORD. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the LORD. Work, for I am with you, declares the LORD of hosts, ⁵according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. ⁶For thus says the LORD of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. ⁷And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts. ⁸The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the LORD of hosts. ⁹The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts.’”⁴

Since there’s a high probability that you didn’t do your devotional reading or a Bible study in the book of Haggai this morning, it probably would be wise for me to give a little background, just as a brief history lesson.

After David and Solomon’s Kingdom, the nation of Israel split into two groups. There was the Northern Kingdom, called Israel, and the Southern Kingdom, called Judah. Instead of being united, they competed with each other—not only with each other, but with the Lord. They sought protection from other nations rather than trusting God to be “their rear guard.” As a result, God removed his hand of sustaining grace. In 722 B.C., the Assyrians defeated the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Then in 586 B.C., Babylon defeated the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

When they were defeated, these groups were taken into exile, although the majority of people were left behind. The cream of the crop—the ruling class—were taken to their captor’s land. This process had a multifaceted purpose. It controlled the conquered people by taking their leaders away, and the captors got the best people to help build their kingdoms. It was a form of control. And it was exile. Quarantine away from your homeland, your smells, your people, your food, and your freedom.

As kingdoms fell and kingdoms rose, God’s people found their way back to the promised land. They came back in several different waves. Haggai is a post-exilic prophet, meaning he came back from exile in Babylon to minister to the people who had been left in Israel. Initially, in 538 B.C., people returned under Zerubbabel and began laying the groundwork for the temple.

The first thing they planned was getting the House of worship prepared. They had their priorities in order. They knew that if we don’t get our relationship with the Lord squared away, nothing else works. It’s why they were in exile in the first place. However, after a few years, the construction stopped. The initial plans halted. People got frustrated building God’s house when their own homes weren’t finished. I imagine it was the same motif we hear today. “Once I get my own house in order, then I’ll think about God.” “As soon as I fully fund my retirement, then I’ll tithe.” “After I have my fun, then I’ll get spiritual.”

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Hag 2:1–9). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

When everything is going well and life is easy, we struggle to focus on God. But then when everything goes horribly wrong, we focus on God—but only for a brief period of time, not long enough to see the plans come into focus.

Building God's temple didn't come easily. It never does. Haggai ministers during this period, trying to encourage people to keep their renewed priorities and to focus on Christ. He comes to the people in chapter 2 to remind them of the coming glory of the temple. The temple was where God had promised to meet with his people. It wasn't just a building; it was to be the center point to renew the land. It was a place of refuge for all the nations, languages, and people of the earth.

In v. 3, Haggai declares to Joshua, the high priest, a thought that we need today. When life isn't easy—when things don't return back to normal—we need to remember that God is with us, and we are called to be strong. Things aren't always going to be rosy. Everything doesn't come easily in life. But there is a sense in which strength is a characteristic of God's people. We know our God is with us. Our people have lived through exile and hardship with hope before; it can happen again.

This Joshua in v.3 is not the same Joshua who entered the promised land after Moses. But, ironically, there's a similar theme. Moses gave Joshua the commandment in Deuteronomy chapter 31 to be strong and courageous. When Joseph entered into the promised land, in Joshua chapter 1, he told the people the same thing: "Be strong and courageous." That is what we are called to be today.

It takes strength to renew our priorities. It takes courage to not allow our hands to rest until we get our main priorities established. From this quarantine, we've realized that any number of things have crept into our lives that are not our main priorities. Our lives have gotten busy with meetings, events, etc., that don't necessarily reflect God's priorities. Now we're called to be strong and to prioritize our relationship with the Lord and the establishment of his Kingdom rather than our own.

The reason why priorities are difficult is that everything we say "yes" to means that we say "no" to something else. There's an old Spanish proverb that says, "When you say 'yes' to one woman in marriage, you are actually saying 'no' to every other woman in the world." In this sense, the "no" is much larger than the "yes." And every "yes" includes many "no's." It may be helpful to think about how to reprioritize your life. What do you want to say "yes" to? Then what practically does that mean you say "no" to?

If you say "yes" to prayer, you may need to cut back a little (not all) phone-gazing. If you say "yes" to evangelism, you may need to say "no" to spending time with Christian friends—or better yet, incorporate the two. If you say "yes" to generosity, you get the wonderful opportunity to say "no" to greed.

I know it seems scary, but look at what it says in verse 5. Haggai reminds the people to "fear not!" God's spirit remains in our midst. Our God will not leave us or forsake us. In verse 7, we are reminded, "*And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts.*" Surely, we are a shaken world. Perhaps God's good hand is leading us to renewed priorities. As Christ himself says, "seek first the kingdom of God."

As we renew our priorities, leave behind your apathy. God's people were lazy about finishing the good work. But God is not lazy. He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it (Phil. 1:6).

Shake off your apathy with a vision—a vision that Haggai gives us in v. 9: “*The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts.*”

Questions for consideration :

- What has crept into your life that has kept you from God?
- How should you reprioritize your life or your family’s life to better serve him?
- Where are the areas that you feel fearful in prioritizing him in your life?
- How in your life can you become the temple of Christ?
- What needs to be renewed in your life?
- What would you like to say “yes” to?

A Prayer for Priorities

Father,

It is so easy to get distracted in this life. It seems like everything fights for our attention. Sometimes it is work, other times recreation. We can quickly waste hours scrolling, “relaxing,” or “vegging.” The Irony is that it doesn’t bring us rest. We grow more tired and anxious when we look at perfect pictures on social media. Even during this time, some feel guilty for not producing. We are trained to have constant input and output.

Christ, what if we could reemerge in a different direction. Would you help us to think through what is important? May we be proactive rather than reactive. Help us to see that you are our priority. May we “seek first the kingdom of God.” Then “all these things will be added unto us” (Matt. 6).

Father, you are the God of the universe, and you are asking us to have a prioritize you above all else. We are insane not to think about the privilege we have been called to. Now may we live with a greater sense of faith, a bigger vision of trust, a courageous lifestyle that reflects the fact that we are safely in your everlasting arms.

Christ help us with our priorities. You never got yours wrong. You loved the unlovable, touched the lepers, taught the faithful, rebuked the unfaithful, and stayed on the mission of redeeming the world.

Father, help us to prioritize our lives the way you would desire. We love you. We are sorry for getting lost. We are following you to freedom.

In the name of Christ, our King, we pray

Amen and Amen

Nehemiah 4-5 – Rebuilt Communities

The Work Resumes

¹⁵ When our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work. ¹⁶ From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah, ¹⁷ who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other. ¹⁸ And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. ¹⁹ And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, “The work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another. ²⁰ In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.”

²¹ So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out. ²² I also said to the people at that time, “Let every man and his servant pass the night within Jerusalem, that they may be a guard for us by night and may labor by day.” ²³ So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes; each kept his weapon at his right hand.

Nehemiah Stops Oppression of the Poor

⁵ Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. ² For there were those who said, “With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive.” ³ There were also those who said, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine.” ⁴ And there were those who said, “We have borrowed money for the king’s tax on our fields and our vineyards. ⁵ Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards.”

⁶ I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. ⁷ I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, “You are exacting interest, each from his brother.” And I held a great assembly against them ⁸ and said to them, “We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!” They were silent and could not find a word to say. ⁹ So I said, “The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? ¹⁰ Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. ¹¹ Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.” ¹² Then they said, “We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.” And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised. ¹³ I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, “So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said “Amen” and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised. ⁵

Another biblical character that reemerged from an exile is Nehemiah. He was part of the third caravan of exiles returning to Jerusalem in approximately 445 B.C. The first thing he did, on a nighttime visit, was to survey the walls around Jerusalem. They were not in good shape. So he made it his mission to restore the walls around the city.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ne 4:15–5:13). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Walls weren't only a boundary to keep people out; they were an essential aspect of security from robbers, beasts, and all types of armies ready to lay siege. The rebuilding of the walls was incredibly needed. One of the things I love about Nehemiah is that he had the vision to bring security and prosperity to the city he loved. As we'll find out, this extended beyond security to caring for the poor and those who lacked justice.

Not only did he have this vision, but he took ownership of it. He viewed it as his responsibility! It's an excellent thought for us. So many times we see a problem in our neighborhoods, churches, clubs or schools and assume that somebody else will deal with it. But the reality is that if we see an issue and have the conviction that something should be different, we need to take the ownership to change it.

William Wilberforce, who was a major player in stopping the transatlantic slave trade, put it this way: *"You may choose to look the other way, but you can never say again that you did not know...true Christians consider themselves not as satisfying some rigorous creditor, but as discharging a debt of gratitude."*

We can choose to look the other way in a situation in our lives, or we could discharge a debt of gratitude—in other words, to view it not as solving a problem but an opportunity to glorify God. We are called to take ownership, to rebuild communities. On a much greater scale, God has taken ownership of our sins and is rebuilding our lives.

The pandemic has shown us the need to get more involved with our communities. There's only so much we can do nationally and globally. The real need is the local food bank, the neighbor down the street who is a single mom with young kids, the older person who needs food or a listening ear, the child who depends on subsidized school lunches. It requires ownership.

I heard recently of a Dominican monk who, when the pandemic started, got himself checked out to see if he had COVID. He was negative. So he went to the local nursing home with a clean bill of health and asked to be quarantined with them. He left his home and his creature comforts to go into a community, not knowing when he would emerge because he knew they would need help, and he could serve. That is taking ownership of your community. Nehemiah does the same.

When we come out of this, we'll need to rebuild our schools, economy, relationships, local businesses, and our trust in each other. Rebuilding a community is something we should all be continually thinking of. But now, hopefully, we will have more thankfulness for the things that we've taken for granted. Or, as Wilberforce says, a debt of gratitude.

Now, instead of being frustrated, waiting in line at Starbucks, we might be thankful just to be able to linger in the coffee shop. Instead of rolling our eyes at our waiter when they get our order wrong, we might be thrilled just to be able to sit and eat, no matter what food approaches our table. It will take all of us to rebuild with ownership.

But here is the reality: there was opposition to rebuilding the walls, as you see in the first few verses of this passage. There is an opportunity with opposition—the possibility of not only ownership but faith. Nehemiah reminds them during this opposition to get ready in case they have to fight, but ultimately it's God that has to do the fight. Look at what he says in Nehemiah 4:20, "God will fight for us." It's a phrase that hasn't passed the lips of a Hebrew for a long time. They ended up in exile because they wanted to

do things on their own, but now the lesson has been learned. God has to do the work. He has to fight. We can only plan and be faithful.

But there's something else beautiful about this passage. Nehemiah isn't just trying to rebuild a community for security. He sees the problems and the injustice and the oppression that people were facing. You can rebuild a community on the outside, but it doesn't matter if the inside is rotten. I recall Jesus referring to this several times in the New Testament. Whitewashed tombs and all that.

Here was the internal problem. Some people owed money and others were lending money with an added charge because of their desperate situation—an old Israelite price gouge no different than doubling the price of bottled water or reselling toilet paper at 1000%. Nehemiah heard this outcry and stopped the work on the wall so that he could stop the oppression of the poor. Dealing with the security of the walls was not as important as caring for the oppression of his people.

Like Nehemiah, I don't want to just go back to a greedy, comfort-filled society. Nor do I want to turn a blind eye to the problems within our culture. With unemployment on the rise and small business owners and others out of work or furloughed, it's time for us to rebuild our community through caring for others. But we also have to go deeper. We need to stop the systematic issues of oppression and injustice, racism, sexism, and poverty. The enemy is within.

The temptation to just fall back in line is strong, as Francis Schaeffer points out: *"Most people catch their presuppositions from their family and surrounding society, the way that a child catches the measles. But people with understanding realize that their presuppositions should be chosen after a careful consideration of which worldview is true."*

The worldview that we could, unfortunately, catch from our culture is one of autonomy, self-sufficiency, and the belief that other people's problems are not ours—that the poor or the oppressed will always be that way because they have gotten themselves into that situation. We could even say with a cynical undertone, "You reap what you sow." And while there are ramifications of our decisions, it doesn't mean grace has ceased. We should be careful about the presuppositions that we've always believed, and now we must figure out how we can rebuild the community around us as a healthier, more biblical culture.

To do this, we'll have to surrender ourselves. The enemy is within not just our walls but our hearts. And it's our selfishness that needs to be left behind in quarantine. This is what the spiritual experience entails, as Phillip Britts reminds us, *"Spiritual experience, if it is of God, will indeed lead to a life of activity. But the nature of true activity is surrender and obedience."*

Our surrender actually leads to activity. Letting go of selfishness means grabbing hold of ownership. So friends, let's take ownership to rebuild our communities and stop the oppression and injustice. Let's surrender ourselves to experiencing what life could be like if we live by this worldview rather than the presuppositions we've adopted. Just rebuild the section of the wall that is in front of you. Start with a rock. Or maybe just a pebble. Or even a cold cup of water.

Questions for consideration:

- Who has been most hurt or damaged in your community?
- What are three or four practical ways that you can rebuild part of your community?
- Who are the people in your community who are oppressed or poor?

- Is there a way your family, friends, or just yourself could take ownership?
- What are the presuppositions about life that you now see are flawed?
- How is it that we can best reflect what God would want for us in our specific town?
- In what ways could God fight for you?

A Prayer for our Community

God,

Thank you so much for putting us in a location. No matter where we are, we all are in a place. And because there is a place, there are people. And because there are people, there are problems.

Our communities need you. They are filled with overlooked problems, dysfunction, and systemic difficulties. We go day in and day out without addressing the real need of our communities.

So we pray for love. We truly desire to love the geography you have placed us in. If we don't have a heart for our environment, give it to us.

May we love our office buildings, restaurants, neighborhoods, churches, city streets and unique character. Right now, maybe more than ever, our communities need to be served, loved, cared for, and encouraged. With the grace of Christ help us to find the needs and serve them.

We pray these things, in your name,

Amen and amen.

Luke 10 –

Repentant & Rejoicing Hearts

10 After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go. ² And he said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. ³ Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. ⁴ Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road. ⁵ Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace be to this house!’ ⁶ And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest upon him. But if not, it will return to you. ⁷ And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages. Do not go from house to house. ⁸ Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you. ⁹ Heal the sick in it and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ ¹⁰ But whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say, ¹¹ ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet we wipe off against you. Nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near.’ ¹² I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town.

Woe to Unrepentant Cities

¹³ “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. ¹⁴ But it will be more bearable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. ¹⁵ And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades.

¹⁶ “The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me.”

The Return of the Seventy-Two

¹⁷ The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!”

¹⁸ And he said to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. ¹⁹ Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you.

²⁰ Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

Jesus Rejoices in the Father’s Will

²¹ In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²² All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

²³ Then turning to the disciples he said privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! ²⁴ For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.” ⁶

Luke chapter 10 is a beautiful picture of God sending out the disciples into a new world. They’ve been with him for a while. Now they move into society, having learned a new way of living. We often think of the ten, but this talks about 72. It reminds us then and now that the harvest is plentiful.

Even in the Bible Belt, in 2020, which I write from, far more people than not need to hear the gospel. But so few of us are willing to take the chance or risk to tell people. Jesus gave the disciples a sense of urgency. The purpose of being with Christ is to eventually leave him to gather others—to call others to repentance as Christ has called us.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Lk 10:1–24). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Part of the process is to travel light (v.4). We can be weighed down with so many things in life—our own fear of rejection, our concern that we will be made a fool if we don't know the answer to questions, a desire to be well-liked by everybody. Jesus reminds us that it is not for us to control. In fact, he says he's sending us out as lambs in a pack of wolves (v.3). So we travel light with our trust in Christ and not much else. No moneybag, no knapsack, and no sandals. In other words, leave your wallet and Airbnb reservation behind, and don't spend time with small talk along the road.

In case you wondered, the message that we go with is a message of peace. It is a message of healing and the closeness of the Kingdom. These are not themes we should be ashamed of. They are beautiful and inviting. In *Exclusion and Embrace*, Miroslav Volf writes, "At the heart of the cross is Christ's stance of not letting the other remain an enemy and of creating space in himself for the offender to come in." I love the phrase "creating space." As we invade our communities with the message of repentance, we're not hindering their free will; we are creating a space for the offender to come in.

There are cities and people that refuse to fill the space—Chorazin and Bethsaida, for example, and countless others. But at the end of the day, the disciples return with joy. God is still at work. I love this prayer of Saint Augustine in his *Confessions*, which reminds us of our ability to return and repent, "You never go away from us, yet we have difficulty in returning to you. Come, Lord, stir us up and call us back. Kindle and seize us. Be our fire and our sweetness. Let us love. Let us run."

The Kingdom of heaven is near (v.9), so we are never far from God. Before we seek to go out with a message of repentance, we should probably first repent ourselves. That includes trusting him and resting in him.

The disciples return and are shocked about all the things they saw God do (v. 17-20). Jesus reminds them not to rejoice in what they accomplished but in what he has accomplished! Verse 20 states beautifully, "Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Ultimately our joy is in the fact that he takes joy in us. And now Blessed are we to see what God has done (v. 23).

But what if you don't feel this way? Your heart might not be rejoicing or repentant. You may feel far and distant from God. You are so stuck in despair, you don't even know how to repent. I want to remind you that Christ is sufficient; the Kingdom is near. If you believe by faith in Christ, you'll find hope for your disparaging heart. This classic passage from John Bunyan points out the possibility of regaining your joy. In his book *Pilgrim's Progress*, which is a metaphor for the Christian life, Bunyan writes:

"Well, on Saturday about midnight, they began to pray and continued in prayer until daybreak. "A little before it was day, good Christian, as one half-amazed, broke into a passionate speech. What a fool I am to lie in a stinking dungeon when I may walk in liberty! I have a key, called Promise. It will, I am persuaded, open any lock in Doubting Castle. Hopeful said, This is good news, dear brother. Take it out and try it. "Christian pulled it out of his bosom and tried it in the dungeon door. The bolt, as he turned the key, came back. The door flew open with ease...then the gate....The Pilgrims hurried on and came to the King's highway."

In this passage, "Christian" is stuck in Doubting Castle, not knowing if he will ever get out. He could stay in his despair or remember the promises of God, even when he doesn't "feel" it. He reached into his

breast pocket and found the key called promise. Christ is sufficient, and his word can unlock any door in the castle of our thoughts which keeps us prisoner.

Now, let us be blessed/happy that we hear these truths. May we travel lightly and tell others. Christ has come to work redemption, not for the healthy but for the sick. We are all Pilgrims in the way of faith.

Questions to consider:

- *What is it specifically that you should repent of today?*
- *How have you tried to take more joy in what you've accomplished rather than what Christ has accomplished?*
- *What are the things that are keeping you from sharing the message of peace with neighbors and friends?*
- *How could you live with more urgency in prayerfulness as you reemerge from the pandemic?*
- *What doubts are holding you back, and what are the promises that conquer these doubts?*

A Prayer for Repentance

Father,

Our hearts are so hardened. We fail to see the problems right in front of us, or in case of our hearts, right inside of us!

We have long viewed repentance as some admission that we weren't good enough. Now may we see repentance as the only way to be good. In admitting we are wrong, we pray we would find peace. All of our life is to be one of repentance and faith. We aren't to be perfect people. We are, instead, to be Holy people—peculiar people who are willing to live in a state of continual repentance. Learning to say "I'm sorry" or "will you forgive me" not just once a quarter but weekly or daily.

Help us to be the leaders in repentance, showing this world that life is about glorifying your sufficient grace for us rather than creating a false image of perfection.

God, you are the God of all grace. And we need it!

So we come to you and say we are sorry. And beyond this, we repent – turn our direction – to following you instead of our own devices, plans, and pride.

Because of Christ, we are thankful we can even have this prayer! It's a glorious prayer. A humble prayer. And a needed prayer.

Forgive us Lord, and restore us, we pray,

Amen and Amen

Matthew 28 – Redemptive Mission

The Report of the Guard

¹¹ While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. ¹² And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers ¹³ and said, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ ¹⁴ And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” ¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

The Great Commission

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” ⁷

During quarantine, new games have emerged. We’ve had to get creative in our homes to entertain ourselves. Some of us, unfortunately, have just vegged on Netflix, YouTube, Amazon Prime, or Hulu. Others have brought out the old jigsaw puzzles, or classics like Monopoly, gin rummy, or spades.

Going through this quarantine has reminded me of some of the old games I used to play. One of the games that I didn’t like very much but played every day in elementary school was “red light, green light.” A person would stand at the end of a field and hold their arms up, and then when they dropped them, they’d say “green light.” Everyone else would run from a line on the other side of the field. The leader, at their discretion, could put up their arms to say “red light.” If everyone didn’t stop immediately, they had to go back to the original line and start over. “Red light” and “green light” continued until someone reached the leader.

I was reminded about the game when I read Matthew 28. It looks like Jesus plays some kind of cosmic game of “red light, green light.” He tells them to go and wait (“red light”) and then he comes to them and tells them to go make disciples (“green light”). In Acts 1, which we will look at tomorrow, Jesus uses a similar pattern.

In this passage, Jesus leads them to the mountain outside Galilee. Mountains were important to Christ. He would often take his disciples to a mountain or go by himself to pray. He revealed himself in the Transfiguration on a mountain. The most famous sermon in the world was named the Sermon on the Mount.

This time, outside Galilee, in familiar territory, the mountain reveals the disciples’ hearts. When they saw Jesus, some worshipped, but others doubted. Some disciples knew at that moment that worship was the appropriate response. Why? Because Jesus had already stated, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.” Christ isn’t a good idea, a moral compass, an ethical teacher, or a spiritual guru. He is the King of all Kings. He is to be worshipped.

In other words, it’s not a game.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Mt 28:10–20). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

But others doubted. The word “doubted” used here in Greek is *distazo*. It actually speaks of hesitation more than unbelief. It’s the same word used in Matthew 14 when Jesus walked on water. They saw these miracles with their own eyes, so they believed it. They were just hesitant to understand and embrace what Christ was doing. After all, these things had never happened before, and it was more than a little unsettling. Let’s give the disciples a little grace. It had been a long three years, and now they were just getting started.

Jesus’ call is clear—to go out among all the nations and make disciples. It’s not a game, nor a club, but a Redemptive Mission. There are several ways that you could view this erroneously. One way is to think discipleship is just for those who are spiritual. But discipleship is for anybody who calls himself a Christian. It’s more like an apprentice, where you learn how to work and live. We follow Christ with the same zeal as 12-year-old boys follow their sports hero. They dress like them, mimic their every move, aspire to be like them, etc. As disciples, we want to be as Christ-like as possible. This doesn’t mean we gather twelve men, wear a tunic, live without a home, and never get married. Rather, it’s thinking deeply through questions like, “How would Christ live, if Christ were living my life? How would he treat people, go about decisions, work in my industry? How would he redeem it?”

The Great News is that there is no spiritual totem pole when it comes to discipleship. We have often believed that martyrs are Tier 1, missionaries are Tier 2, Pastors are Tier 3, then there’s the rest of us, with elementary teachers getting a higher priority. It doesn’t work this way. We all follow Christ! We are to serve Christ as his disciple, whether we are in high school, business school, a mechanic, weatherman, accountant, politician, CEO, Professor, or plumber.

Dallas Willard puts it this way: *“You lead people to become disciples of Jesus by ravishing them with a vision of life in the kingdom of the heavens in the fellowship of Jesus. And you do this by proclaiming, manifesting, and teaching the kingdom to them in the manner learned from Jesus himself. You thereby change the belief system that governs their liveswhen we bring people to believe differently, they really do become different. One of the greatest weaknesses in our teaching and leadership today is that we spend so much time trying to get people to do things good people are supposed to do, without changing what they really believe.” Dallas Willard The Divine Conspiracy*

This Redemptive Mission gives us a larger calling. Our hope is not going back to normal, to our games, recreation, and lifestyle we miss. The goal is to “believe differently” and thus “become different.”

You may still have your doubts (read: hesitation) about being a disciple. Perhaps you feel that you have nothing to offer or that you are damaged goods. How could God possibly use you? Maybe there is a secret sin or a deep scar in your life. Well, there is good news. God has a way to use our scars to show his love. After all, on the mountain, he still had the scars on his hands and side as he told the disciples to go and make disciples. Dan Allender, in his book, *To Be Told: Know Your Story, Shape your Future* says, *“So take seriously the story that God has given you to live. It’s time to read your own life, because your story is the one that could set us all ablaze.”*

What is it about your story and life that you could shepherd for the Glory of God? What little ember could you fan into flame so that people would be set ablaze? Maybe it’s the story of God protecting you from abuse, or being a widow early in life. Perhaps you were a prodigy or pulled yourself up by your bootstraps. We all have a story to shepherd as God’s disciples.

There's another error in our thinking of discipleship. Sometimes we believe it's just about production rather than formation. The disciples had already begun their formation process. Now they are called to "make" or "form" other disciples. Friends of mine called this being cruciform. And the form is not a cookie-cutter. However, it all takes the shape of a cross. And on the cross, we see the pattern of death and resurrection. This is the rhythm of the Christian life. We are dying to our sin and living to Christ. We can't live for Christ until we die to the patterns and behaviors that keep us from knowing him.

Some questions you can ask yourself at this point are: What do you need to leave behind to become his disciple? Are you formed more by the culture or your desires or what other people think of you, or are you formed and molded by God's word and prayer and his truths?

There is one more aspect to this Redemptive mission that we need to consider—obedience. If this is a rescue mission for the world, it's important to follow the instructions. I don't know about you, but if I were an unlawful prisoner in a foreign country and Special Forces came to rescue me, I would follow every one of their directions to get me out. Their commands would not be burdensome. I would gratefully, obediently, and joyfully follow them to Freedom.

1 John 5:3 says, *"For this is the love of God, that we keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome."* We often think of them as cumbersome—somehow hindering us or not allowing us to enjoy life. In reality, God's commandments are meant to give us life (John 10:10).

Following God's commands requires obedience and faith. Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it this way: *"the following propositions hold good and are equally true: only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes. It is quite unbiblical to hold to the first proposition without the second...If, however, we make a chronological distinction between faith and obedience, and make obedience subsequent to faith, we are divorcing one from another – and then we get the practical question, when must obedience begin?"*

Faith and obedience are both required to obey God's commands, because His commands don't always seem logical. Take, for example, the issue of sexuality. We live in a pretty oversexualized culture. Most people will say "Why does God have commands about sexuality? After all, I'm not hurting anyone; it's consensual, and this is natural, it's how God made me." The response to this thinking is, "Of course it's natural, because sin is natural!" We have a sinful nature. Now you can just follow your nature, and that can be the god who you are becoming a disciple of, but do you really trust yourself that much?

Perhaps by faith, there might be a perspective we can't naturally see. God wants to form us, not have us fit a box of obedience. He desires to have us be an altogether New Creation (2 Cor. 5:17)! So if we are a New Creation in Christ and called to follow him as disciples, we have to obey what he says about our sexuality. But we don't only obey; we follow by faith. The commands may be difficult at times, but through faith we encounter the mystery and benefits and experience of learning to trust and love God. And as we live by faith, in obedience, we find what we are truly made for.

It's not a game; it is a redemptive mission. God has come to redeem us from following our sin nature, instead forming us by Christ's death on the cross and his resurrection. In doing this, we are part of rescuing the world together. In short, we just want to get everyone home safe.

And the resurrection reminds us that it is never too late to start viewing ourselves as new creations. As Robert Flatt says: *“The resurrection gives my life meaning and direction and the opportunity to start over no matter what my circumstances.”*

Questions for consideration:

- Have I viewed Christianity more as a game for spiritual people or as a glorious rescue mission?
- What would it look like to view it more as a rescue mission in my life?
- What are the areas in my life that are out of conformity with being a disciple?
- What do I need to die to?
- What are the commands that I have always viewed as burdensome?
- How can I pray for faith to help me obey God’s commands that feel this way?
- Am I willing to pray right now for faith concerning the commands that make me feel this way?
- Who are the people in my life that need to hear about God’s redemption?
- What part of my story is unique that I can use to show Christ to others as I disciple them?

A Prayer for Redemption

Father,

This world is yours and everything in it. Now it’s run down. It needs repair. It needs redemption. To do this, you have invited us to a glorious rescue mission. To remind each other what we are made for. To teach each other how to get home.

God, there are so many people that need to hear your good news. And blessed are the feet that bring this good news. We know the truths, of your word, that set people free! We are known, loved, forgiven, freed from our sin, and restored to relationship with you. Now set us on the mission, with a clear objective to share Good news. It is Good news!

Let us not be ashamed of the power of God to save and to hear our prayer. I pray that we would have the fervor and zeal to boldly proclaim the gospel without hindrance.

Christ, thank you for dropping behind enemy lines—living and incarnational life, defeating all of our enemies and saving our souls. Now we join you in the mission. And help us remember it is not a mission of power, control, or politics; it’s a rescue won with kindness, mercy, love, and service.

We love you, Christ, may we fulfill your plan to tell the world of your great love.

Amen and Amen

Acts 1 –

Receiving Power

¹ In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ² until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

⁴ And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

The Ascension

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” ⁹ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” ⁸

It is funny to think about the fact that Jesus quarantined the disciples for 40 days in Jerusalem. He knew they could not move forward without the power of the Holy Spirit. Neither can we.

In this text, we see that the disciples missed the point of what Christ was trying to do. They asked him in verse 6 if he was going to restore Israel. Throughout Jesus’ ministry, the disciples had a desire that Jesus would be a political ruler or would establish a new Kingdom on earth, even though Jesus stated plainly, “*My Kingdom is not of this world.*”

This explains why so many people missed the Messiah. Jewish people spent their lives reading the Old Testament looking for clues about what the Messiah would look like. Their erroneous belief was that a Savior would come to establish earthly control, power, and comfort. But Jesus said that his Kingdom was not of this world. And he wants to give us far more than earthly power and control. Those gifts are too much for us to handle. Instead, he wants to give us the power of his Spirit.

We, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, can often miss Christ if we are making him fit a box. Worse yet, we can make him into a God who is only going to bring us comfort and security. Thankfully, Jesus is bigger than all of our boxes. We need not worry that Christ isn’t doing his job as a Savior. As Corrie ten Boom said, “*Worry is a cycle of inefficient thoughts whirling around a center of fear.*” But because our Savior isn’t in any box, he can give us the power we need. This brings great relief.

Like the disciples, we need to recognize what we truly need. They thought they wanted an earthly Kingdom and the power that comes with it. They were anxious about who would sit on his right and left. But if COVID-19 has taught us anything, it’s that the things we thought were important really aren’t. Charles Spurgeon notes how our fears can be misguided:

“The worst evils of life are those which do not exist except in our imagination. If we had no troubles but real troubles, we should not have a tenth part of our present sorrows. We feel a thousand deaths in fearing one, but they (the Christian) are cured of the disease of fearing.” - Charles Spurgeon

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ac 1:1–11). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Most of our troubles are imaginary. We fear things that aren't reality. But with perspective, the real fear is God not giving us the Spirit's power or his presence to walk through life. So here is Jesus' promise that makes our fears subside: *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."*

Now our confidence for the future is not our power, but God's authority. Christ is seated at the right hand of God, ascended, triumphant, victorious, and enthroned (v. 9-10). He's conquered all and given us his Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing his return. Now we are called to get on with it. We shouldn't live in fear or anxiety. And we don't have to stand around with a paralyzed gazing. I love the playfulness of v. 11, *"And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'" Now that God has ascended, we are called to move forward, not in fear or anxiety but in faith and with the power of the Spirit.*

As we reemerge from this quarantine, let us not be caught gazing. Let's be thoughtful about taking stock of our lives. We should check our spiritual temperature as much as our physical—not to see if we have a fever but to see if we have any zeal or love for God. Again Spurgeon is helpful:

"Therefore, I pray you, set apart some season every day, or at least some season as often as you can get it, in which the business of your mind shall be to take your longitude and latitude, that you may know exactly where you are. You may be drifting towards the rocks, and you may be wrecked before you know your danger. I implore you, do not let your ship go at full steam through a fog; but slacken speed a bit, to see whether you are in deep waters or shallow. I am not asking you to do more than any kind and wise man would advise you to do; do I even ask you more than your own conscience tells you is right? Sit alone a while, that you may carefully consider your case."

We've been through a difficult time together with a global pandemic. It's uncharted waters. But nothing is outside of God's hand of providence and sovereignty. He is still risen, ascended, and enthroned. Perhaps God wants to shake us up so he can shape us into something more beautiful. This hard reset helps us to see that everything shouldn't go back to normal. We could reemerge differently. Like a butterfly coming out of a cocoon, we can be, with God's help, a new creation. Let's be thoughtful about what God wants in our re-emergence.

Like Sir Francis Drake, I would urge you to open yourself up to what God would want to do in your life during this time, and then let us rejoice, seek, and follow him together.

Disturb us Lord – Sir Francis Drake

*Disturb us, Lord, when
We are too pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true
Because we dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to the shore.*

*Disturb us, Lord, when
With the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst*

*For the waters of life;
Having fallen in love with life,
We have ceased to dream of eternity
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision
Of the new Heaven to dim.*

*Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wilder seas
Where storms will show Your mastery;
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find the stars.*

*We ask you to push back
The horizons of our hopes;
And to push back the future
In strength, courage, hope, and love.*

*This we ask in the name of our Captain,
Who is Jesus Christ,
Amen!*

A Prayer for Receiving

Holy Spirit,

We need to be receivers of your power. We have lived too long in our own power and strength. What little we have, runs out so quickly. We end each day depleted of our energy and resources. We need to live a different way, with sustaining power.

Holy Spirit, you tell us to receive your power. We have to admit that we are so closed off to the reception. We love and value our own self-sufficiency. Generally, we don't like to be needy. But what we really need is your Spirit. You are our comforter and guide. May we be open to accepting the help you want to give.

Then when you give your power, may we live in it, keep in step with it, and relish in the opportunity to walk each day in your presence. With your help, may we take your comfort to every language, tribe, and tongue; in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

We receive your power for your purposes.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

Amen and Amen