

Lessons Along the Way

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Please be seated.

Well, we're not home yet because there's a building still to be put up. One of the children said to me, "What's behind that door?" And something terrible in me wanted to say something scary but... Clearly there needs to be a building put up behind that door.

We're not home yet in a much more profound sense because we're still pilgrims and there is a glory that awaits. We are people who belong to another place, another city whose builder and maker is God, and so we are and always will be pilgrims in this world. But we are home and today we're here where we love to be and we love to serve, and we're thankful to God, we're thankful for those who worked for us, we're thankful to those who were kind to us, but really most of all we're thankful to our Triune God, Father, Son and Spirit. I'm not really preaching on 1 Samuel 7:12 but it is apropos for us to say thus far the Lord has helped us and what I really want to speak to you about is about lessons that we've learned over the last two years. I want to suggest six lessons that we have and should have learned along the way.

The first lesson is this, that God's great concern is for souls. God's great concern is for souls. God is so concerned about souls that he burned a building down in order to reach them. Our God is the God of missions. Our God is the God of evangelism. We read in Genesis 12 God says, "In you all the families of the earth will be blessed." That's always been God's plan, through your seed, through Jesus all the nations will be blessed, and it's as his people, we're the people of God and it's as his people preach the unsearchable riches of Christ to the world, that they come and all the nations will come streaming to Christ. God has always had his sights on the nations and it's always been his plan that through us, through the church, through saints like us, they will come and God is dedicated to that.

You remember the Lord Jesus as our Lord makes his way to the cross, the Greeks seek him out and they say this, they make this extraordinary statement, they say, "Sirs, we would see Jesus." And then you begin to see changes, you begin to see in the book of Acts that extraordinary things happen and you see the nations coming, and you see people streaming to Christ, men and women and young people of every nation and tribe

and kindred, and they're coming to Christ. And it continues in our day, and it continues in the world, and it continues in our country, and it's going on because God has a passion for lost souls and God's passion for lost souls is at the root of what happened to us, and in the sovereign plan of God our building was burned down and through that God put us in front of television cameras and put our words down on paper, and God orchestrated opportunities for unbelievers to ask all of us all kinds of questions about the gospel, people in our families and people in our workplaces. Just the other day someone at the gym asked me about, "Oh, are you back in your building? And how are things going?" And this is not a believer. And so God has been orchestrating opportunities and really putting words in our mouths, giving us the right things to say, and it's all stemmed back to that particular event and they've come and they've talked to us and we've been able to speak to them about Christ and the reason this has happened, and it's because God cares about souls. That's why it happened.

It happened because God cares about souls and Jesus Christ wants them to come and the Lord Jesus weeps over the lost, and so the call must go out and the command must be issued and they must hear the gospel, and this is more important than a building, and it's more important than our comfort, and it's more important actually than our sentimental attachment to a particular place and a particular building. I mean, I just love that old place but this is more important. This matters. It matters more than anything else. It matters that sinners are snatched from the fire, and that's why God does things like this because he cares about souls.

We read in Acts 8 that there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles, and you read that as they were scattered, they preached the word. As they were scattered, these believers shared the gospel. Now that wasn't an accident, that was God. God did that. God saw to it that they were scattered and that as they were scattered, they took the gospel, and as they interacted with people, they shared Christ with these people, they preached the Lord Jesus. God in his passion for souls sends his people running for cover and as they do so, they preach the gospel and God has sent us as a congregation running for cover, as it were, and he's given us opportunities to speak words of life to people outside of Christ.

We read what John Wesley said and he said, "I desire to have both heaven and hell ever before my eye while I stand on this isthmus of life between two boundless oceans," and that's how we want to live, heaven and hell always before our eyes, understanding how important it is that they hear the gospel, understanding what the heart of God is, understanding God's passion for souls. We want to live like that in light of the past two years. We must live like that.

Jonathan said to me before the service that Ruth Brooks has been praying that at our first service the arsonist would be sitting in the front row and get converted. Well, this being a Baptist church, no one's sitting in the front row. Some things don't change, but that prayer is true to the heart of God. We hold that person no grudge. We don't care that you burned a building down, we're concerned about your soul. That's what matters.

So look, God's great concern is for the lost and so we will plead with him as did the psalmists and as did the prophets that all the nations will praise him, and we'll be willing to send out missionaries and we'll be willing to talk about the gospel to people because we know, now we know better than we ever did that God is concerned about the lost.

Secondly, God's great provision is people. God's great provision is people. You may remember that the first series we did after the fire was about the church. I had planned in my holidays to come back and preach a series on the nature of the church, and then the building is burned down. So object lessons. And we learned that people make up the church. It's not a building. And we learned that God provides those people and God is building his church and he is taking living stones and he's building his temple, and he places them in the church and he places them in positions of influence, and he ordains service for them. These living stones of his, these people who make up his body, he ordains service for them.

So God's great provision is people. He's provided his servants, that's what God's done for us, he's provided his servants. God's provided servants within our church. God's provided people to lead us and help us and God provided a willing people, members of the congregation who have dealt graciously with all kinds of inconvenience and refused to complain in the face of all kinds of frustration. And this is no small gift, you know. It's an evidence of grace and it's a manifestation of God's kindness to us, and it's a work of the Spirit in the people of God, and people have worked hard and they've done all they could for the kingdom, not for praise but for the kingdom. And God also provided us with a board that we needed. The Lord has given us men who have both the gifts and the graces to serve the Lord in our day and in our need.

You read in Esther 4:14 and it is said of Esther, "who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" And I've often thought about this text over the last couple of years and what it tells us about God's providential supply of the right person at the right time for the right ministry, and I've watched and I've listened as our men have led us and our particular ones have stepped up and how sacrifices have been made and service has been rendered and grace manifested and enormous work has been done, and all I believe for the honor of Christ. And I believe that God has put these people in positions, in these positions; he's given us these individuals for this particular hour and for the benefit of the church and for the honor of Christ.

And so he's provided servants inside our church and he's provided servants outside our church. Now we've learned that the body of Christ is a large body which transcends the borders of our church and that's a big lesson, you know. We must hold to our particular beliefs. We must cling to our distinctives and we must be thankful for our traditions, but at the same time we appreciate that there are others in the body of Christ who don't dot their i's the way we do and don't cross their t's as we do, but they serve the same Lord and they want to be used in the same kingdom and we'll spend eternity with them. And so, you know, we've seen that in no uncertain terms and we want to always remember that, and we've been objects of Christian love and the recipients of Christian kindness from all

kinds of believers, from Pentecostals, and Evangelical Anglicans, and Dutch Calvinists, and Fellowship Baptists, and of course, from our own Sovereign Grace Fellowship and, well, we've seen that there's a wideness to the body of Christ that really is astounding and very encouraging and should not be forgotten.

So, yes, God has provided his servants but more fundamentally he's provided his Son. God's great provision is people and he's provided his servants for us, but he's more fundamentally, he's provided his Son. Trinity, we're not a club, you know, we're a church, and we exist for the glory of Christ and for the promotion of his kingdom, for the furtherance of his cause and for the building of his church, the people. Galatians 3:28 says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, there is no male nor female; for you are all one in Christ," and this great body of believers made up of sinners, saved sinners from all the nations of the world, we come from different backgrounds and different nationalities and different ethnicities and God has put us together as a body, and we are brothers and sisters in Christ and we're part of a grander scheme, part of a greater work and a grander endeavor than we could imagine, and we're part of this great church of the Lord Jesus Christ and we owe our very existence to Jesus Christ to who he is and what he has done for us, to the sufficiency and the saving efficacy of his work. What I'm trying to say to you is that we owe our existence to that person and thank God for the people through whom God has in recent months in the last two years blessed us so abundantly, but first and foremost we owe our existence to Jesus physically and because of redemption we exist as believers and we exist as a church because of him. So all of the glory goes to him.

So, yes, God's great provision is people, especially the Lord Jesus. Thirdly, God's great plan is our godliness. God's great plan is our godliness. Unbelievers, you know, struggle when it comes to understanding suffering and is there any purpose in this suffering. And you know, we've suffered to a degree. You and I know that there is all kinds of suffering that goes infinitely beyond what we've had to go through, but my point here is that as Christians we understand that there's purpose in suffering. There's a reason. We don't always know all the reasons, for sure, but we know that there's reasons. There are reasons why we go through difficulty.

Now there are numerous layers to the purposes of God but we know that the Lord God omnipotent reigns and he sits upon the throne, and God, that God who reigns, that God who works everything after the counsel of his will, has a benevolent purpose in mind for us. It wasn't a stroke of bad luck when they set fire to that building. It wasn't just a chaotic universe working itself out. But God was in control and he has various layers of purpose, and one of God's purposes in our present circumstance was and continues to be very clear and it's that we might grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ; that we might be manifesting more and more true godliness; that we might be more like Christ, more holy.

We know from Romans 8:28-30 that God has predestined us. This is not an afterthought. God predestined us to be like Jesus. He predestined us to be absolutely spot-on perfect holy. God's predestined us to that. We're not there yet by any stretch but one day that's

where we will be and God is greatly concerned, then, for our holiness and one of the things he will do to transform us, to move us along in this journey of holiness, one of the things he'll do is to blast our gourds, to take away treasured things, to put us through difficulty, to expose us to frustration, and he'll do that so that we might be more like Christ, so that we might be more conformed to his image. We know that from Romans 5 and we know it from Romans 8, we know it from James 1, and all throughout the Scriptures, Psalm 119:67 and 71, "Before I went through this affliction I went astray, But now I keep Your word." We understand to a very real degree the reason for the things that happen to us, and we know that one of the reasons is that we would be better persons and better Christians and better and more like Christ, and we understand that it's more important that we be holy in the midst of the affliction than that the affliction be taken away. We understand that. It's not what we want because we want, you know, a reasonably free and easy life. I get that. We tend to want that more than anything but the fact of the matter is that God sees this holiness as more important than our ease, and so he puts us through difficulty and he has done and we thank him for it because it's been for a good purpose.

So God has brought us through this so that we might manifest Christian graces. God brought this all along so that we might manifest Christian graces and I do believe, and I say this to the glory of God not to the praise of people, but I do believe we've seen that. I'll tell you what I see, okay? I'll tell you what I've seen and I've seen a minimum of complaining, and I've seen godly responses in the face of provocation, and I've seen gracious cooperation in the midst of frustration, and I've seen an ability to work together in harmony in the midst of trying circumstances, and God has brought these difficulties along so that our lights might shine and they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

God's brought this along so that we might manifest Christian graces and God has also brought this along so that we might grow in Christian graces. I suspect that your experience has been of the same sort as the trials that our board has had, and we know from James 1 that the trial of our faith produces perseverance, patience, longsuffering, putting up with stuff, and that's what God has in mind. That's why he puts us through these various many-splendored kinds of afflictions, it's so that we might, well, be patient and be godly and be loving and so on and so forth, and that has certainly been our lot and it's been our experience and there's no doubt, then, that God's intent in all of this is that we might grow in patience, in love for one another, in dependence on him. Grow in this, grow in dependence on God. Grow in a recognition of providence. Hone your skills when it comes to seeing the hand of God in circumstances. He's done this all so that we might grow in our appreciation for the labors of others and that through it all we might become better Christians.

So yes, God's great plan is godliness, our godliness. Fourthly, God's great emphasis is dependence. God's great emphasis is dependence. If you read 2 Corinthians 1 you'll find that Paul faced trouble that almost killed him, and he says that the reason it happened was so that he might learn not to trust in himself but to trust in God. And we've learned that to a real degree.

Dependence manifests itself in a spirit of prayer and I believe that the Lord has stirred within us a deeper sense of the need of prayer. We've brought all kinds of matters to the Lord over the last couple of years. We've prayed for all kinds of things. We've prayed for a place to worship. We've prayed for a sense of unity. Prayed for permits. You know, there's outside that last window there, there's a bird's nest I noticed, and I asked some of the people whether we need a permit for that because I thought you kind of need a permit for everything, I'm gathering. So we, well, we prayed for permits and for insurance money and favor in the eyes of bureaucrats, and prayed for strength for our men and grace for their families and patience for all of us. And in the midst of it, we've prayed that God would, I mean, we're not a construction company, we're a church, we minister to people, we shine the light, we tell the gospel to people. We want that to go on and we've wanted it to go on over the two years and we've been praying for that. And we brought it all before the Lord because all of this is beyond us, all of this is beyond our abilities. For this we're not sufficient so we brought it to the Lord, we poured it out before the throne of grace.

I recall two seasons in the life of our church wherein we had, I believe, the most profound sense of dependence and a very profound spirit of prayer, and the first was after Bill Payne's death, and the second has been after the fire. And so it always is because usually times of extremity prove to be God's opportunity to really teach us good lessons and especially this lesson of dependence, this need for prayer.

And so I believe that we've been stirred in real measure with a sense of the need for prayer and now I want to encourage you to pray for something else, I want to encourage you to pray that we would not lose that sense of dependence and that we would not only not lose it but that it would deepen, it would become a more profound understanding that it's all up to God and we are utterly and wholly dependent on him, and we must cry out to him for everything we do. We want to pray that we'll understand that more and more profoundly as time goes by because we have to remember that simply being back here does not guarantee God's blessing. I mean, I'm not trying to be a wet blanket and I don't know if anybody's more thrilled. I get choked up when I walk in here so I'm not trying to be a killjoy. All I'm saying is that just being here doesn't guarantee blessing and that's why, then, with a renewed sense of God's passion for souls and of God's commitment to our godliness and with a deeper sense of our absolute dependence on him, we need to now throw ourselves with fresh vigor into all of our ministry but with this great sense that God must bless, and this great determination that we must cry out to him and call down blessing from heaven upon all of the things that we shall do in the days and in the years to come.

So God's great emphasis is dependence. Number 5, I have six lessons. Number 5, God's great blessing is providence. Providence. I was in England at the time at a conference there attending the Banner Conference, and I got an email from the elders saying that we needed to be out of Crossroads like really quickly, and then a few days later Jonathan emailed and said that, "Yeah, we can be at Ebenezer and it's all worked out." Well, we've seen that kind of thing repeatedly. God's great blessing has been providence because you

remember that God saw to it that someone drove up this road early in the morning and saw what happened here so that this part could be saved. That was the providence of God, not a lucky stroke. It's the providence of God and God saw to it that Christians tried to help us, and God saw to it that opportunities of witness came along, and God saw to it that Christians provided facilities for us, and God has every step of the way looked after us and provided for us. And that's his providence.

Then to reflect on the last six months, we've been reminded again that the Lord is on the throne. People in our congregation began to get sick and were facing trouble and experiencing loss of life in family, and all manner of difficulties, as you well know. And we were convinced again by their reactions and about how they responded and things that were said, and we were reminded again that the Lord is on his throne and that there's no need to panic because God is a sovereign God, and God is a God who works all things after the counsel of his will, and God is a God who works all things for the good of his people and for the glory of his name, and we are in the palm of his hand and we're cherished in his heart, and we'll be with him in his glory, and so all is well for the people of God.

And the great kindness and mercy of God is that he's a God of providence. God moves in a mysterious way. His ways are very mysterious. We would not certainly always choose his ways but we know they're better and we know they're good. And he moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform. They are wonders of grace and wonders of love, and we want to leave God to order all our ways because his ways are better than ours and that's where peace lies.

And so in the past two years we have been forced, I mean our faces have been taken and we've been made to see, look at the providence of God. See the hand of God in all your ways. We've been made to see that. We've been forced to see that. We've been urged to depend on that. And so, yes, today we thank God that he's the God of providence and we've been taught to say, "It is the Lord. Let Him do what is good in His eyes." And we're happy for that.

And then lastly, God's great example is love. God's great example is love. There is a great lesson for us here, a great lesson for us to follow, and that is that God loves us. We should learn to love the sinner and love the saint in light of God's great love because, you see, God's love for sinners motivated this act. God's love for sinners motivated this act. This fire and all of its consequent frustrations, God's love for sinners motivated that act. There's the providential provision of a fire that was born of a love for the lost. God wants his gospel to reach the lost.

As you know, you may recall 100 Huntley Street wanted to hear about the fire and they had me interviewed on the show, but the lady, the host said before, before the interview she said, "Well," she says, "we'll talk about the fire, but," she says, "the fire is just providing an occasion to tell people the gospel." You see, she understood, she understands the heart of God. She understands the love of Christ, that this fire, this providential provision of a fire was motivated by love for sinners in the heart of God.

And if you're not a Christian, that should really astonish you, you know. Peter Pickard said years ago, "God will do anything, God will go to any length to bring sinners to Himself." There's great truth in that and that should be astonishing for you if you're not a Christian, to consider, to think that God will do extraordinary things to confront you with the gospel, to expose you to his love, to show you that he wants you to be saved, to call you to Christ. So think about that and then realize now what an extraordinary thing that you should be allowed to be here today, not just to celebrate with us about, "Oh, you're back in your building, isn't that great!" Or, "We're back in our building," you might say, "isn't that great!" But think about this, that God this morning calls you to Christ because that is what all of this is about. It's that sinners might be won to Christ. That's why God left us in the world, it's to tell people like you about Christ. That's why we exist as a church, it's to plead with you to believe in Christ. That's why God has brought you in some way into connection with us. Maybe you're always here, maybe you're just visiting, maybe you're listening to this, but the reason God has done this is so that you might be saved. The reason he burned down the building is so that you might be saved. What an extraordinarily gracious God this is and how necessary and how sensible that you should believe in Christ today. This God of love who more than these things sent his Son to die for sinners so that salvation is real because Jesus died, he paid for sins so that those who believe in him might be forgiven, that's the kind of extraordinary God of grace we have. So don't let another moment go by before you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Don't spurn his goodness. Don't turn your back on his kindness. Don't waste the opportunities. Don't waste this opportunity that you have today to believe in Christ.

And so God's love, you see, is love for sinners like you motivated this act, and then God's love for the saints motivated this process. God did this because he loved us, because he loves us, always loves us. He did this so that we would grow, you and I grow in the grace and knowledge of the Savior. You remember Job and Job says at the end, you know, after all he's gone through, after all of his trials and tribulations even at the hands of his friends, he says, "Oh," he says, "I had heard of You by the hearing of the ear but now my eye sees You." And we understand that a little better because we've seen God make his arm bare and we've seen God care for his own, and we've seen that he will not forsake us, and we've seen that he is always with us and that because he loves us. It's as simple as that.

And so, you know, we know him a little better. We've come a little closer. We walk with him a little more intimately and we're thankful for whatever instrument he uses to accomplish that, and the bitter trials afford sweeter experiences of God and for that we are thankful because there is no greater blessing and no greater privilege and no sweeter experience than to know him, and if this has brought us to a greater depth of knowledge and a sweeter experience of him, well, we're thankful.

God's great concern is souls. His great provision is people. His great plan for us is our godliness. His great emphasis is that we be dependent on him. His great blessing has been his providence, how we've rejoiced in that. And the great lesson to us is, well, that he loves us. And may we learn and then live for his glory.

Let's pray.

Our great God and Father, we acknowledge that You are seated upon a throne, You are the high and the lofty God who inhabits eternity, and You are bringing to pass in time and space Your holy will, You are building Your church, You are saving a people, and You're using us to reach others. What a privilege for us to be part of that. What a joy for us to be the recipients of so many kindnesses from You, not the least of which is this particular building that we're in and the hope of one that will be built. Oh, we're thankful for these things and more than anything for Your Son. Oh, we're thankful for Him and we pray that this day through us and through Your people all over the world, Your kingdom will come and Your name will be glorified that we ask for Jesus' sake. Amen.

We shall sing, appropriately, in conclusion 104 in grace hymns. 104, "Great is Thy faithfulness." Let's stand to sing.