

## Six Lessons the Lord Taught Me in 2013

- You know I love and am committed to expository preaching. The proof is in the pudding. But as has been my custom for the past few years, I would like to delay our return to the book of Acts for one more week as I look back to what the Lord taught me in 2013 as I read through the Bible again. I hope and would expect that we all have a list like this. Maybe you haven't sat down and thought about what the Lord taught you in 2013, and if not, I encourage you to do so. Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Paul wrote to Timothy, "Continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed," and of course he then pointed the young pastor to the Scriptures, "which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." (2 Tim. 3:14-15). The most important things we have learned this year were from the Bible. I would be hard pressed to find out what those were without the help of my journal, since I sometimes have trouble remembering what I learned yesterday, much less in February. So I continue to beat this drum: write things down. Somewhere. In a journal that you keep in your Bible. On your laptop. Hey, you can even journal in your smart phone! ☺ But do it. They will serve you now, building your faith as you realize that though you are not where you want to be, by God's grace you are no longer where you USED to be! You have grown in your love for the Lord and His Word. But there's another reason to write things down: it will serve those who follow after you. How many of you have had the privilege of reading the journals of a godly parent or grandparent, learning from their struggles and their triumphs? Very few. Why not start that legacy in your family now?
- **#1- Friendship is a sheltering tree.** That's from a poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and I have always loved that image. Last year on January 2, I read this in Job 2:11: "Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that had come upon him, they came each from his own place...they made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and comfort him." I wrote in my journal, "I've never noticed (that) before...did Job just have three friends? Or, is it that he had three close friends, which are more than most men have? I thought about the fact that Jesus, in one way of looking at it, had three close friends, Peter, James, and John. It made me think about the men who are my close friends, and give thanks to God for them. This idea came up again in my journal on March 18 when I was thinking about the day before when I ran a marathon with another brother and a close friend. I wrote, "The last four miles were torture. But, it was great to run with a friend." Solomon must have just run a marathon when he wrote, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!" One of the greatest privileges is to have a friend who will help you up when you fall, whether you fall into discouragement or whether you fall into sin. One of the greatest dangers, especially for men, is to isolate yourself to the point that you don't have anyone close enough to you to tell you the truth and you will listen.
- **#2- Endure suffering.** That's what Paul said to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:5. "Always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry." I wrote in my journal, "It occurred to me this week that if we don't endure suffering, we will most likely be the cause of suffering for others." John Mark would not endure the suffering that came with the first missionary journey with Paul and Barnabas and he bailed. The result was present and future suffering for Paul and Barnabas: they didn't have the young man's extra hands on the journey, but worse, they had a falling out over whether to take John Mark on the second journey. Endure suffering. It is its own reward. When we endure suffering, we avoid future suffering. Young men, keep yourselves pure. Keep yourself pure in your relationships. Keep yourself pure with your eyes. If you endure the suffering that comes because you flee youthful lusts instead of giving in to them, you avoid the future suffering you would be frontloading into your marriage.
- **#3- There's no equal to a father's influence.** I took the family to see the movie, "42" in June. It's the story of Jackie Robinson and how he broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball in 1947.

There's a powerful scene in the movie where a father and his young son are sitting in the stands, talking about the Brooklyn Dodgers' shortstop, Pee Wee Reese. "How many hits do you think he'll get tonight, Dad?" the boy asks, and it's clear that Reese is a hero to the boy. Then Jackie Robinson comes out to play first base for the Dodgers. The father starts yelling at him, calling him the 'N' word, saying, "You don't belong in baseball." The boy is troubled at first. You can tell that in his heart he knows that his father's behavior is not good. But then he joins in, calling Jackie Robinson the 'N' word himself, right there with his father. Then it happens. Pee Wee Reese, the boy's hero, comes over from shortstop, talks to Jackie Robinson to encourage him while the crowd is yelling racial slurs at him. Then Pee Wee Reese puts his arm around Jackie's shoulders, and the crowd goes nuts, booing Pee Wee Reese, their star shortstop! The camera goes to the boy, and you can see the conflict all over his face. His hero likes a black man! Then Pee Wee Reese says to Jackie, "Maybe tomorrow we'll all wear number 42, so they won't be able to tell us apart." It's a great scene, but what the Lord spoke to me clearly through it was, there's no equal to a father's influence. The head of the family has been given tremendous authority. If he uses that for evil, as the father in that scene did, he leads his family into evil. But when he uses his authority for good, God gives great grace there. I love the scene in Abraham's life when he learned that the enemy had captured his nephew Lot and his family. Abraham acted. "When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men..." (Gen. 14:14) That phrase leaped off the page to me: "When Abram heard, he led."

- **#4 - "Wherever you are, be all there."** That is one of my favorite Jim Elliot quotes. I thought of it this year as I read about the Babylonian exile in Jeremiah 29. The people of God were forced to live in a place that was not their home. They could have wasted those years by going on a sit-down strike or whatever. But God told them not to. We also don't live in the place that is our home. We are strangers in a stranger land, no matter where on the planet we live. But wherever we are, God calls us to be all there. Look at Jer. 29:4-9. 1- Build houses. 2- Plant gardens. 3- Marry. 4- Have children. 5- Bless the city where you live. 6- Don't believe the lies of the culture.
- **#5 - "For the sake of Christ, be content with weaknesses."** You know the passage in 2 Cor. 12, where Paul was given a thorn in the flesh, and asked God three times to take it away. We don't know what it was, except that it was a weakness of some kind. A limitation. And Paul heard these powerful words from Christ after he had asked the third time for deliverance: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness." Then Paul says, "Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me." This has been a year of different physical challenges for many of us. I have had some, too, but mine are nothing compared to the suffering that some of you have been through. But God would have us to be reminded this morning that His power is made perfect in our weakness. I was reminded of this on August 21 when I went to see the good folks at Piedmont Retina Specialists in Greensboro. I had been having problems with my left eye, seeing flashes of light and floaters, and looked it up online and figured that I had a torn retina. The doctor looked at it and said, "Yep, you have two tiny tears in your retina. But the good news is, if we do laser surgery and repair those tears, there's a 90% chance your retina will not detach, which can be very bad." They did the surgery and had to dilate my pupil to do it. It was still the size of a quarter when I left there and walked out into the blinding light. When I was leaving, after I paid the bill, I noticed a stack of these wrap-around eye shields on the counter, but didn't think I would need one. But when I was blinded by the light, I went back inside and got the eye-shields. With those on, the light was still very bright, but bearable. I could see enough to drive down 70 back to Burlington. But not like I normally drive. I drove much more slowly and much more cautiously. I was literally "driving while impaired!" I thought about that the next day and realized that my weakness, not being able to see very well out of my left eye, made me a very patient driver. I wrote the next day, "I noticed I was a much calmer driver with my impaired condition. Teach me, Lord, to recognize my constant infirmity and my constant need for You!" His power is made perfect in our weakness.

- **“There’s no plateau for believers.”** Spiritual growth doesn’t happen by accident. Or by osmosis. You can’t sleep with your Bible under your head and learn Scripture. Or spend time listening to other people pray and never pray yourself and expect to become a prayer warrior. A farmer doesn’t read books on farming and expect a healthy crop. He has to prepare the soil, sow the seed, cultivate the plants, and keep the ground watered. A child fell out of his bed with a thump one night and his dad heard it and came in where the boy was getting off the floor with some groaning. “Why’d you fall out of bed?” his Dad asked. The boy said, “I guess I fell asleep too close to where I got in!” That’s the problem with too many Christians today. They “get in” by grace and through faith and then they fall asleep. If a Christian is not growing, that may be the reason. There’s no plateau for believers. We don’t plateau. We are either growing up in Jesus or we are falling away. **Our lives as believers either makes hell tremble or makes it laugh.** You know who Eric Liddell was, don’t you? Scottish runner immortalized in the movie, “Chariots of Fire.” He refused to compete in his best event, the 100-meter, because the finals would be on Sunday. Eric Liddell switched to the 400 instead, which was amazing in itself. The 100 and the 400 are totally different races that employ totally different strategies and there is almost no one who is excellent in both. Eric Liddell switched to the 400 and then won Olympic gold in Paris in 1924. Eric Metaxes wrote this: “(By refusing to run in the Olympics on Sunday,) Eric also revealed the value he placed on obedience to God: he ranked it above the greatest treasure the world could offer.” The second half of Eric Liddell’s short life was spent as a missionary to China. When WWII broke out, the Japanese came into China and gathered all of the missionaries and forbid them from teaching, preaching or practicing medicine. They essentially became missionaries without a mission. But Eric Liddell was not one to sit idle. He wrote a book called *Discipleship*. Later, the Japanese basically imprisoned the missionaries in internment camps. So Eric Liddell organized the young people in the camp and taught them soccer, basketball, cricket and tennis. He taught Bible Study, even to the Japanese guards in the camp, and exhorted his fellow Christians to pray for them. One man in the camp, Joe Cotterhill, was so moved by this, he promised God that if he survived the war, he would become a missionary to Japan. Eric’s suffering in the camp became a springboard for greater ministry, as he grew in his love for God and for people. He saw a 17 year old named Steve Metcalf in camp whose shoes were completely worn out. He handed the young man something wrapped in cloth one day and said, “Steve, I see you have no shoes and it’s winter. Perhaps you can use these.” They were Eric’s running shoes, the same ones he had been wearing when he won the gold medal in the 1924 Olympics. Eric died of a brain tumor in that internment camp in February of 1945. 63 years later, just before the Olympic Games in Beijing, the Chinese government revealed something that even Eric’s family didn’t know. Eric had been included in a prisoner exchange deal between Japan and Britain but had given up his place to a pregnant woman. Paul said, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.”
- There’s no plateau for believers. There’s just a finish line.