

PLEASANT PLACES; A GOODLY HERITAGE

July 4, 2021

Psalm 16:1-11

“The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage.” Psalm 16:6

The psalmist here describes his blessings, using the language of an heir who has received good land as his inheritance. The “lines” are measuring lines by which land was measured for its boundaries. When those lines fall in pleasant places, upon good land, it is a “goodly heritage.”

When reading the psalms, we should keep our eyes focused to see three people: the psalm’s author, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the reader. Those three may be seen in many psalms in general, and in this psalm in particular. First, there is David, the author. He cries out to God amid his troubles, longing for deliverance. But he turns quickly to acknowledge God’s goodness to him, affirming, “The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage” (v. 6). David had seen great troubles, determined enemies and deep sorrow, in the midst of which he cried out unto God for deliverance. Yet everything in his life had worked God’s holy purposes. More than once, stronger enemies would have killed him. Humanly speaking, his death seemed certain. But his foes could not succeed, for God would bring David into his heritage.

God lifted him from the humble shepherd's task to be king of Israel. Immeasurably greater, God exalted him to be a father to God's Son, the King of Kings. In Christ, David has an everlasting inheritance and throne, a kingdom which has no end. Thus he proclaimed, "The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage."

Second, Christ Jesus is to be seen, for the psalm is clearly prophetic. It is cited in the New Testament as prophetic of Christ's resurrection. Peter, in his sermon on the day of Pentecost, said of Christ: (Acts 2:25-31,

For David speaketh concerning him, I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved: Therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope: Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. Thou hast made known to me the ways of life; thou shalt make me full of joy with thy countenance. Men *and* brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day. Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne; He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption. Act 13:35-38).

The apostles cited this psalm when preaching Christ. David's experience is to be seen as prefiguring Christ, the Son of David. Christ too suffered the hatred of enemies, and their fiercest destructive rage. But it all unfolded unto the fulfillment of His God-appointed purpose of

redeeming a people from damnation and unto Himself. They are His heritage, and the lines fallen unto Him were thus pleasant.

Third, the believer is to see himself in this psalm. Psalms express the trials and triumphs of God's people in every age. They suffer great grief and hardship, as did David and Christ, but they "know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:28, 29). Thus, every one of God's children can say with confidence, "The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage.

I want us to testify to these pleasant places and this goodly heritage this morning as divine providence has fallen out to the congregation that makes RBC its home, and as it has fallen out to me personally in connection with this congregation. Indeed, my life and my family's life has been, in the kind providence of God, woven inseparably with the life of this congregation for nearly 70 years, so that we cannot speak of one without speaking of the other also.

The brief time-span that begins each year on June 19 and ends on the first Sunday of July has become uniquely significant to this congregation. I want to focus upon the events that have made it significant.

My desire is to acknowledge the good grace of God to me personally, and to this congregation, in giving us the goodly heritage that we share. Therein, I trust to give encouragement unto prayer, and an eye to behold divine providence working amid the circumstances of life. Moreover, I trust to bring honor to our God by observing His kind ordering of all things for the good of His people.

On June 19, 1952, 69 years ago, this congregation was chartered under the laws of the State of Maryland. Although the founders doubtless were meeting prior to this date, June 19, 1952 is looked to as the date for its founding. With dismay they had discovered the descent of their denomination into apostasy. Facing ridicule, scorn and hostility, they took seriously the command of I Corinthians 6:14-18:

“Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?

for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in *them*; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean *thing*; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.”

How pleasant the lines, and what goodly heritage befell this body of God’s people in the ensuing years! Indeed, as we’ve entered into the seventieth year of this congregation’s life, we can join with our fellow-members who’ve gone on to heaven, and proclaim “The lines have fallen unto us in pleasant places; yea, we have a goodly heritage.”

Thirty-nine years and six days later, on June 25, 1991, another significant, albeit dark event was added to the brief and notable calendar-span. The founding pastor, Donald McKnight, my father, died unexpectedly on that date in the home of one of our members. He was attending a prayer meeting there. The meeting was called to offer special petitions for God’s favor upon an evangelistic tent meeting that I was scheduled to preach here three weeks later. That morning my father had driven a school bus picking up children for the church’s daily Vacation Bible School. Everything with him appeared to be as usual. No one imagined that his death would be that evening. He remained vigorous

and active until the end of his earthly pilgrimage. Although only 66 years of age, he had lived a full life, perhaps fuller than two men his age, and was taken without warning and without the lingering agony that so many suffer as they await a death that is so slow in coming. How wonderfully God used him here! We are all heirs to his life-labors. We can say with the psalmist, the lines have fallen unto us in pleasant places; yea, we have a goodly heritage.

On a personal note, which has become inseparable from the life of this congregation, **it was on the first Sunday of July, 1979, 42 years ago this morning, that I entered into full-time pastoral ministry, preaching from this pulpit. Therein a third event** is added to that brief calendar-span. Those four decades seem to have evaporated as quickly as a vapor. Surely it cannot be that this morning I begin my 43rd year of pastoral ministry.

In retrospect, it is clear now for me to see what God was doing when seven years later, in the first week of July 1986, God took Diane and me with our two sons to Greenville, South Carolina. We chose Greenville because our first son would be entering kindergarten that autumn, and we knew there were good Christian schools in Greenville. And, locating there would place us near Bob Jones University where I was completing

an academic project. Residing in Greenville would give ease of access to the university library and faculty.

But God foresaw a fuller purpose for our move to South Carolina. A church in Spartanburg was seeking a pastor. It was late summer/early autumn when a pastoral candidate who was scheduled to preach for them cancelled at the last minute. Sunday was approaching, and they needed a warm body to stand in their pulpit. So one of the church leaders called one of my former teachers at Bob Jones University, and he suggested that they call me.

To make the longer story shorter, I preached twice for them that first Sunday. They requested a resume, and I continued to supply their pulpit. By the end of the year they called us to be the pastor and wife of Cleveland Park Bible Church. We spent the next five and a half years ministering there. God blessed our efforts. And while there He blessed our growing family with two daughters and a third son.

It was late summer or early autumn 1990, less than a year before my father's death, that he and my mother visited with Diane and me and the 4 children that we then had at the parsonage in Spartanburg. While there, my father asked me if I would preach in a tent meeting here the following summer. He also told me that he had asked the chairperson of

the pastoral relations committee to contact me and initiate discussion concerning returning to this pulpit upon his retirement.

As the next summer approached, I prayed earnestly for divine direction, anticipating that I might be faced with a decision to choose between Spartanburg or Dublin. The danger of being drawn back to our home-place by emotions and family ties rather than by the guidance of the Holy Spirit was one we sensed keenly.

As I prayed, God gave me great liberty to pray at length and with earnestness, so that an hour of prayer seemed as only a few minutes. For months, with increasing supplication, I was led to pray that God would show me whether I should remain in Spartanburg or return to Maryland, and to petition that He would manifest His guidance by a very evident intervention, something that was clearly an act of God. Knowing that we are capable of convincing ourselves falsely of many things, I wanted a clear act of God, over which no human had any control.

As we vacationed in a time-share loaned to us by a family in the Cleveland Park congregation, the owner called me on Wednesday morning, and suggested that I needed to call home. I called, and learned that my father had died the night before in the prayer meeting. As I told Diane the news, knowing what I had been praying, her first words were, “Well, we know what we have to do.”

We told no one of this, but waited for the congregation here to work through the process of organizing its efforts to procure a pastor. One year later, on the **first Sunday of July, 1992, twenty-nine years ago, I entered into the role of senior pastor, adding a fourth event** to that brief calendar-span that I've mentioned.

It proved to be a very difficult transition for the congregation. I had not anticipated the large minority that opposed our becoming pastor and wife. Nor could I have anticipated their determined and relentless opposition to our presence here after we had moved. The next few years were not always pleasant, and I began to realize why God had answered my prayers for guidance with an act of God so profound and undeniable as taking my father from this life. Were it not for such powerful confirmation, I may have been tempted to take my family elsewhere, assuming that I had been mistaken. But I could not ignore that an unmistakable act of God had been supplied as I had requested of God, and that this is where I was to minister.

Most unsettling it was to learn gradually who was at the core of that opposition. Yet God used even this to give us peace and to vindicate our call to this pulpit, affirming to us that we had known and followed His leading, and that we were in the place of His appointment. Christ said, "A prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his

own kin, and in his own house” (Mark 6:4). Indeed, what Diane and I were experiencing was exactly what Christ cited as a mark of His servants. Strangely, opposition from those closest to us strengthened our confirmation that God had called us to this ministry.

As this process unfolded, I was driven once again to the same fervency in prayer that God had given to me in the months prior to my father’s death. But what was I to pray?

I recalled how the prophet Elijah suffered dejection as he fled for his life from wicked queen Jezebel, immediately following his great triumph against Baal on Mt. Carmel. He was downtrodden in spirit, and outcast, and requested of God that he might die.

I recalled how hours earlier Elijah had prayed powerfully on Mt. Carmel that God would send fire upon his sacrifice. He prayed, “let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word” (I Kings 18:36). Did this petition include a desire that God would vindicate him personally, “let it be known this day . . . that I am thy servant?” And if so, might that desire for personal vindication be what turned so quickly into self-pity as he fled from Jezebel? Desire for personal vindication does not serve God’s people well. It takes their eyes off of the One whom they serve, from the

One who is their keeper, focusing upon self, often preempting and perverting His work.

This question led me to pray that God would rather vindicate His truth in this place. Again, God gave to me great liberty in that prayer. I could enter this sanctuary in the early pre-dawn darkness, prostrate myself here upon the floor, and cry out unto God that He might move in this place in such a manner as to vindicate his truth.

I prayed for the congregation's spiritual health. I prayed for a list of other pastors. I prayed that God would supply added land that was needed, and above all, that He would vindicate His name and truth in this place.

Now, when I glance back over the years, I see clearly how wonderfully God has answered that prayer, and I can say, "the lines are fallen unto me, and unto us, in pleasant places." I now perceive five means by which the vindication of the truth we embrace and proclaim has been given; five distinct answers to my prayer that God would vindicate His truth among us.

THE FIRST: One day during this season of prayer I received a call from a widow whose husband had died tragically in a construction accident more than a year earlier. She had received a financial settlement

from the tragedy, and wanted to give \$5000 to the ministry. Roughly one month later, I received another call from a lady who had sold some land, and from its proceeds desired to give \$5000 to the church. For twelve consecutive months, gifts in the amount of \$5000 or more came unsolicited to the ministry from unanticipated sources, in addition to regular offerings.

One of those months, the call was from Pastor John Dekker, who met with me to explain how at his advisement a lady who listened to his radio broadcast had named Harford Christian School in her will. We never knew her, and she never stepped foot on this campus. He had lost contact with her years earlier, but had now received a call from an attorney who was settling her estate. When all was settled, nearly \$350,000 came to the school. This year-long succession appeared to me a vindication of the ministry being endeavored, and of the truth being preached, as I had prayed.

As time passed, neighboring real estate parcels for which I had prayed became available, and the congregation was able to purchase them. Several parcels for which I had not prayed, we were also able to purchase, all of them strategic to the ministry's operation. But the greatest vindication of truth has not been physical or financial.

THE SECOND: Beyond material blessings, there is a second divine vindication of truth. It is the fact that I am still here; that today I enter into my 30th year as Senior Pastor of RBC, my 37th year of ministry among this congregation, and my 43rd year of pastoral ministry. The truths that are the biblical framework of my pulpit ministry have been sustained, and strength has been given to me to preach and apply them. Whereas transition years of my first decade here were difficult, preaching was never difficult; God always gave a great sense of liberty to me as I sought to proclaim His truth.

THE THIRD: You are here. To a large extent, a different congregation now worships here; most of those who were here three decades ago are now in heaven. And you have not been drawn here by entertainment, social activities, modern worship styles or “church growth” tricks. Rather, you are here because of the truth for which vindication was prayed; truth which guides this ministry in all of its particulars, whether it be worship style, Christian educational philosophy and practice, social or moral issues etc., etc., it is that truth that has drawn you together, and therein lies a third answer to the prayer that God would vindicate His truth in this place.

THE FOURTH: A solid portion of this congregation is a new generation of men and women who embrace that truth with vigor, understanding and conviction. Many of their generation has departed

from the faith entirely. Many have fallen for a man-centered, man-serving distortions of the gospel. But God has brought into this assembly a sincere, devoted and talented group whose belief and practice distinguish them from the larger mass of modern evangelicals. They are now in the prime of their lives, or will soon reach that pinnacle. They embrace the historic doctrines of biblical and reformed orthodoxy that we preach. They believe and practice the separatist convictions that have distinguished this congregation throughout its history.

I am tempted to refer to them as young men and women, for that is what they were when I first met many of them; but they are in fact middle aged adults who are in their prime. They labor diligently and discerningly among us. They add great strength and dimension to this congregation. They have undertaken many of the responsibilities for managing and leading this ministry, and are well able to take it, in the providence of God, into future generations.

I hear the children's choir on the mornings that it sings. Where else can we find a group of children singing the psalms and great historic hymns in so reverent a manner; hymns whose message is so consistent with the truths we preach, sung in a manner so consistent with their rich message? Those who train and lead them are part of that generation of which I speak, a generation already providing great energy and direction

for the congregation; a generation whose presence is a vindication of the truth, a vindication for which I sought God.

I contemplate their presence and labors, and know that God has heard and answered my prayer that He vindicate His truth in this place. They, with their convictions and their commitment, are truth's great vindication here. The lines are fallen unto us in pleasant places, yea, we have a goodly heritage.

THE FIFTH: On the first Sunday of July 2017, four years ago, a fifth event was added to that brief calendar-span of which I speak. **Pastor Eshleman entered the pastoral leadership of this congregation; an event that continues to be a most evident vindication of the truth we preach.** He entered with unique gifts for thorough and exacting exposition of Scripture, and has not failed to illumine, challenge, edify and bless us with insightful preaching and fine-tuned application of Scripture.

I look at all of these mercies as I enter my 30th year as senior pastor, and my 37th year of pastoral labor in this pulpit, and can say with deepest gratification and worship, "The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage. The LORD is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup: thou maintainest my lot."

I find myself now striving to find the safe pathway between two pitfalls. On one hand, I may step aside before God's time for me to do so has come, and thus transgress His purpose and abandon my duty. On the other hand, I may abide too long (as so many ministers have) and deny, obstruct or curtail for this assembly the gifts, talents, vision, energy and strengths of a younger generation that is manifesting the fear of God, and that is zealous for the progress of the truth they vindicate by their presence.

Gospel ministry is a calling, not a profession, and from a divine call one never retires. But waning endurance, diminishing creativity, in short, the dying flame—all advise that a man in my station of life to begin moving into a less prominent presence. Such movement has been initiated, and must continue apace.

Last autumn, I asked Pastor Eshleman to prepare the preaching schedule for 2021, and requested that he include me no more than 25% of the time. He is now doing a fair share of the preaching, and should be doing more as time passes.

If I live unto autumn, I will have reached my 65th birthday, and while I no longer consider that to be old, I must recognize that it is older. One reaches a maintenance stage of life, when he is no longer envisioning future exploits, but is focusing rather upon maintaining what he has.

One put it this way: “I’ve quit buying green bananas.” I’m not quite there yet, but know that most men in my stage of life should be replacing themselves with younger men who have their full energy, clear minds and visionary focus to the future; men who are equipped to do the work of the ministry. God has provided them in this place. And God has vindicated His truth by supplying a strong force of those men. One who is my age should be getting out of their way and getting behind them to support their labors.

Above all, I trust to be useful in God’s service for as long as I live. I trust to be a blessing to those God has ordained to lead this congregation into the middle of the century. I am conscious that if I live as long as my father did, I have less than 2 years left. Now, I expect to live longer than that, but so did he. That is in the Lord’s hands, and I have not the least concern about those matters. But between now and then, I must position myself to do as much as I can for His honor, which includes encouraging the rising generation in its march into the future, as God tarries.

This is certain. In all things I can testify, and this congregation can testify, with David and with Christ, “The lines are fallen unto [us] in pleasant places; yea, [we] have a goodly heritage The LORD is the portion of [our] inheritance and of [our] cup: thou maintainest [our] lot.” The psalmist who proclaimed, “The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places” continued in verse 11, “Thou wilt shew me the path of life.” The

One who has led clearly throughout my life and this congregation's life, has not brought us thus far to abandon or confuse us. He will continue to shew us the path of life.

All of this considered, I anticipate that one year from today, if not sooner in the will of God, I will step aside as Senior Pastor, and plan to take a less prominent role in the life of this congregation. I anticipate this Autumn initiating formal discussion with the Board of Stewards regarding how this process should move forward.

One piece of unfinished business remains to be addressed in the coming year. In 2014 it became necessary for us to sever our denominational affiliation and become an independent congregation. At that time, we adopted five historic statements of faith as the doctrinal definition of the congregation, and agreed to continue governing the church under the provisions of the book of Discipline of the Evangelical Methodist Church, as had been done throughout the church's history, until such time as we could develop our own book of church order.

Since 2015, that *Book of Church Order* has been in development. For nearly two years, Pastor Eshlemen and I worked together to prepare a document that would be true to Scripture while respecting our history and the customs unique to this congregation, and that would set forward a clear set of guidelines for ordering the affairs of the church. This

document was then submitted to a committee comprised of ministry administrative staff and stewards, who for a year or more worked through the proposed book word by word to refine and revise it for our purposes. That committee's work was then submitted to the Board of Stewards, who for more than a year have also examined, revised and edited the document, word by word. Now, by unanimous affirmation, the Stewards present it to the congregation for further fine-tuning and ultimate affirmation.

Having done everything that we can do to prepare this draft of our *Book of Church Order*, it is time now for the congregation to examine and consider its contents. Following the service, a copy is available for each family as you leave the service this morning. Each is encouraged to examine its contents carefully and thoroughly.

Beginning the first Sunday in August, this *Book of Church Order* will be examined in the Adult Sunday School class to explain its content and the rationale for the content as it is presented. We desire that ample time be given for questions and for discussion from members of the congregation, and for revisions to be incorporated into the document as it moves toward its final form. We are hopeful that by the time of our Annual Congregational Meeting in October, all questions will have been asked and answered, all revisions will have been incorporated, and a

congregational vote can be taken to adopt the Reformation Bible Church *Book of Church Order & Statement of Faith*.

Let us begin today to pray earnestly for God's guidance and blessing upon this endeavor, and upon the matters we've contemplated here this morning.