

September 12-16, 2022 Edition

Following

The Year Of Jesus Part 37

James On The Trouble With Trouble

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday:

"For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope." Jeremiah 29:11 (NLT)

Reflection: Don't you just love Jeremiah chapter 29? I mean, come on! God knows the plans He has for me. Plans for good in my life... plans designed to give me hope and a future. Sounds pretty awesome, doesn't it? I imagine that's why you see this verse everywhere you look when you walk into a Christian bookstore. It's on t-shirts, posters, mugs and Bible covers. You'll see it from time to time on Facebook featured in nifty memes that are designed to give us hope when we see them.

And I'm not trying to say this verse shouldn't give us hope but what do you think it really means? What is God promising? Is it to fulfill your plans and dreams or to fulfill His plans and dreams for you? To answer that question let's back up a little bit and look at the context of this amazing verse. Jeremiah is writing to a group of people who have been kidnapped and taken into exile in a country far away from their homes. Babylon destroyed the nation of Judah about 800 years before Jesus was born and dragged a huge percentage of the population off into exile. That's how they handled every nation they conquered- exile for the majority of the people. They'd drag off the majority of a nation and sprinkle them throughout other conquered nations and then take people from those other conquered nations and put them in Judah. It was their way of assimilating a culture and nation. Their idea was that if there was no dominant culture in a nation then they would never have to worry about revolution. There wouldn't be enough Israelites left to make any waves.

And their strategy worked for every single people group that they conquered in the ancient world, except the Jews. The Jews maintained their culture and identity as a distinct people group wherever they went. It's really mind boggling when you think about it. How did they survive? Why weren't they assimilated? Well there are probably many answers to that question but one is, God told them to remain distinct. He also told them to stay put. Most of the Jewish people saw the conquest of Judah as a slap on the hand by God for their disobedience. They thought God was just getting their attention and that after a few years He would bring them back to the promised land. Consequently the exiled Jews weren't really settling down. They were just sort of biding their time until God put things right again. That was their plan. That was their dream.

But it wasn't God's plan for them. What God says to these people who are impatiently awaiting His intervention is found a little earlier in Jeremiah chapter 29:

Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. Jeremiah 29:1-6 (NIV)

Say what? Build houses? Plant gardens? Create families? That sounds like a long term thing, not what they had planned at all. Can you imagine why it was hard for God to find prophets to speak to the people on His behalf? They weren't terribly popular people. In fact, they were often killed for their truthfulness, for telling people what God said that the people didn't appreciate. God comes to these people who are waiting His action and tells them- for this generation who is

hearing this message, you will never return to your homes. You will live and grow old and die in exile in Babylon, but you can handle it because what you really need is not just in Jerusalem. I will be with you in your Babylon. I will be with you in exile. So I want you to bless the world in which you find yourselves. I want you to kind of be like salt and be light in a dark place. Build, plant, and marry. In other words, you can worship God in Babylon. In other words, the God of Israel is also the God of Babylon, they just don't know it yet. Babylon's plan was to assimilate the Israelites into their kingdom. But it turns out God's plan is to assimilate Babylon into God's kingdom. So with all that in mind, let's read our scripture for today again:

"For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope." Jeremiah 29:11 (NLT)

Now sometimes the exile we find ourselves in is geographical and we find ourselves, like the Israelites, in a place we really would rather not be in and we're waiting for God to step in and fulfill His promise in Jeremiah 29. Sometimes we are in relational exile, or emotional exile, or maybe even physical exile because of a problem we are having with our body. We see the t-shirts with Jeremiah 29 written on it. We bought the mug and post the FB memes. Why hasn't God stepped in and done what He promised yet? Is He ever going to release me from my exile? Yes... but maybe not in the way you think He should. Maybe you, like the Israelites, will find yourself in exile for the rest of your life (I know, I don't like the sound of that either) or maybe He'll step in and transplant you at some point (just about every testimony you read or listen to about God's faithfulness comes from a person who was transplanted out of their exile... we need to hear more from the people who God leaves where they are but who bloom where they've been planted). According to Jeremiah 29 our job isn't to do the transplanting- it's to bloom where we've been planted right here, right now. God's dreams for you are real and He is planning on doing something amazing in your life- but chances are you wouldn't have thought it up on your own. No miraculous story in the Bible begins, "and then some human had a really great idea and God said, 'whoa! I never thought of that... let's go with your plan!'" This is God's plan for your life. He created you. He designed you. He knows what will lead to your ultimate happiness and fulfillment.

So bloom where you're planted. How do I do that? Well, that's what the rest of this week will be all about.

Tuesday:

Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. James 5:13 (NLT)

Reflection: Have you ever wished you were stronger? More resilient? Have you ever wished you were a powerful person of faith? I know I have. I used to think that there were just some people who were stronger than others and there was nothing much to be done about it. I thought some people are strong and some are weak.

Boy was I wrong. It turns out that anyone can become a powerful man or woman of faith. It's just like lifting weights- you've got to put in the practice if you're going to get stronger. Most of us know what we would need to do to become power lifters. Start lifting weights. Join a gym or buy a ton of free weights (literally). And if I'm a beginner I'd probably be wise to get myself a

trainer- somebody who knows what it takes to get stronger using the tools of the trade. But what if I want to become a powerful man/woman of faith? What do I do? Where do I start?

A study was done a few years back on faithful people. A survey was given to churches where people were asked to identify someone they knew in their church that they would consider to be a powerful man/woman of faith. Then once those those people were identified the researchers interviewed these powerful men and women and asked them about their practices/habits/disciplines. Six habits started to pop up over and over again that these powerful people of faith had in common. All of the people identified as powerful men/women of faith practiced prayer, Bible reflection, community, investing in others, generosity & were experts in developing sensitive callouses.

In other words, they all prayed regularly, read their Bible's and spent time meditating/reflecting on what they had read and what kind of impact it should have on their lives. They also had a community of people they had chosen to belong to and they invested heavily in those people's lives. They were extravagantly generous (giving back to God and giving to those with less than they had) no matter how much (or how little) money they had and they all had extremely healthy ways of dealing with the suffering that they experienced in their lives. We will spend the next few days summarizing these habits and then spend the next 22 weeks pouring over them as we go through James' handbook for living the Christian life. Today we'll start with prayer.

Have you ever decided you were going to become a prayer warrior? Have you ever set out to pray every day at a set time and spend a certain number of minutes/hours in prayer? How'd that work out for you? A few of you just thought, "great! It's been a faithful practice of mine and it's changed my life." But I know that a bunch of you just thought, "thanks for reminding me of what a complete and utter failure I've been when it comes to praying!" I remember once I went to a weekend seminar called Change The World School Of Prayer. I wanted so badly to be a prayer warrior. I'll never forget how defeated I felt when the instructor told all of us that in order to please Jesus we all had to pray for at least one hour (uninterrupted) every day. His reasoning for that number came from the gospels when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane and He said to His followers, "could you not pray with me for one hour?" The instructor said he read that one day and clearly heard Jesus say to him, "you need to be praying one hour a day."

That's great. No problem. I'm with you. You needed to start praying one hour a day in order to obey what you heard Jesus saying to you. Then the instructor told all of us that Jesus wanted all of us to pray for one hour every day. Ok, hold up. Time out. That's where the disconnect came in for me. I have no problem with you doing something extreme because you believe Jesus has asked that of you. I have things like that myself. But for me to take what I believe Jesus is asking from me and tell you that you also have to do what I am doing is when things start going off the rails. There was a group of guys in the first century that believed God was asking them to do some pretty extreme stuff. They were called the Pharisees. Jesus scolds them. Often. But it's not because they're doing extreme stuff that they believe God has called them to do. It's because they tried to bind what they believe God asked them to do to go above and beyond the actual commands of God on other people and condemned them when they couldn't live up to the same extremes the Pharisees were living up to.

All that to say this. All Jesus says is that He wants you to pray. He has some guidance especially in the Sermon on the Mount:

When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. When you pray, don't babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don't be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him! Pray like this: Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us today the food we need, and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us. And don't let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one. "If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins. Matthew 6:5-14 (NLT)

What do you get out of how Jesus tells us to pray? Pretty simple, right? Now the more you and I know about the other six habits of highly effective followers of Jesus the more our prayers will change but prayer isn't rocket science- it's talking plainly and honestly with our Father in Heaven. And it doesn't have to take an hour- in fact I timed how long it took me to pray that model prayer (often called the Lord's Prayer) and it took me less than 30 seconds (22 seconds for me).

I've spent a lot of time beating myself up for not being a better pray-er. I have what you might call spiritual ADD. I start praying and pretty soon my mind is gone thinking about what I'm having for dinner or something else equally important like whether turtles have knees or elbows? I've listened to a lot of people talk about prayer and one thing I've noticed is, there is no one-size-fits-all way to pray. I mainly do what I call popcorn prayers. I try to keep an open line of communication opened between Heaven and earth at all times. If you've ever walked into the church when I was in there alone you might have heard me talking out loud when nobody's there. Sometimes I admit I'm talking to myself. But often I'm talking out loud to God just about whatever I'm doing/thinking at the moment. It might last 5 seconds or 5 minutes depending on what we're discussing and what I need help/guidance with but it's gotten to be sort of second nature with me.

And it's changed my life.

All that to say this- don't let anyone tell you what your prayer life is supposed to be like. But pray. It's one of the habits of highly effective followers of Jesus.

Wednesday:

Happy are those who don't listen to the wicked, who don't go where sinners go, who don't do what evil people do. They love the LORD'S teachings, and they think about those teachings day and night. They are strong, like a tree planted by a river. The tree produces fruit in season, and its leaves don't die. Everything they do will succeed. Psalm 1:1-3 (NLT)

But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into

the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it. James 1:22-25 (NLT)

Reflection: Today we're going to continue looking at the 6 habits of highly effective followers of Jesus by looking at Bible reflection. I won't spend an entire day on each of these 6 categories but this one seems very important to me because it will inform all the rest of the habits. What is Bible reflection? Well, it's more than just reading or even studying the Bible. The Pharisees knew the Bible better than anyone in their day but it didn't incline their hearts towards God. They had more knowledge than anyone and yet Jesus repeatedly told them they were farther away from God than prostitutes and tax collectors. So then what different about reflection?

Reflection isn't just about study- it's about recognition. As I read the Bible I look to see if I seem something God wants me to see/hear. There are moments as I read that I won't notice much (probably more about my inability to focus on a regular basis than anything else) but then there will be moments when it's like a jolt of electricity goes through me. I'll never forget one day when I was pretty new to this whole thing and I was reading through the book of Colossians. I got almost to the end of the first chapter when I read this:

So we continue to preach Christ to each person, using all wisdom to warn and to teach everyone, in order to bring each one into God's presence as a mature person in Christ. To do this, I work and struggle, using Christ's great strength that works so powerfully in me. Colossians 1:28-29 (NCV)

When I read that it was like that jolt of electricity I was talking about. It's like something in my soul was trying to make me aware of something truly important that I had just read. I started to realize how meaningful bringing people into the presence of Jesus would be for me. I made sure to remember that particular passage of scripture. I reflected on it and thought about it as I went about my day and week and month and year and life. That's one scripture that means a lot to me and I never would have found it if it wasn't for the fact that I actually opened God's Book and read it like He was writing to me. But reflection isn't just about thinking on or meditating over what I've read. It's also about looking for my "reflection" in the Bible. When James talks about a man who sees his reflection in a mirror and then after walking away immediately forgets what he looks like, what is he talking about? I think James is talking about reading without asking myself if maybe it's something I should be reflecting on. The Bible is meant to be a mirror that shows us the beauty inside of us and the ugliness. We often miss both. We miss the beauty of who we are and we miss the areas God wants us to improve in. Both are deadly when it comes to living a strong life of faith.

When I had been at this "following Jesus" business for a year or two I started to think I was getting pretty good at it. I had a ton of Bible knowledge and I was pretty good at debating with people who were "wrong" and putting them in their "place". We don't have time for the whole story so in the spirit of brevity I'll just say, I had become a Pharisee. I knew I had been a "disreputable sinner" before I came to Jesus but it never occurred to me that as Jesus cleaned me up I would become like the people to whom He had more negative things to say than anyone else when He walked this earth. One day I was listening to a sermon (believe it or not it is

possible to see myself reflected in the scriptures even when someone else is reading them) and I saw clearly (more clearly than I would have liked) that I had become a Pharisee.

I. Was. Devastated.

I wasn't sure what to do, but I knew I had seen myself clearly reflected as a Pharisee as the scriptures were read. After seeing my "reflection" in the scriptures I spent the next few days "reflecting" on what the Bible had shown me. I knew I had to change... I just didn't know what change would look like. I didn't know how to proceed. Do you know what I figured out? That the Bible would guide me. When my ideas were changed by the Bible it was like the kaleidoscope I was looking through had been turned and consequently everything I looked at after that- even stuff I was very familiar with in the Bible- was changed. By looking for my reflection in the scriptures (do I see something God is wanting to say to me here?) and then reflecting on what I heard God saying to me, God was able to move me forward as I followed His Son. I took one more step closer to being "more and more like Christ" (Ephesians 4:15). Do you see why this category isn't just called, "reading your Bible", or "studying your Bible"? There is SO much more to it than that. But if you do this, the promise is amazing. James tells us if we do it then God will bless us for it and Psalm chapter 1 tells us that Bible reflection will make us happy, strong & successful. What more could a person ask for? Want to be blessed, happy, strong and successful? Reflect on your Bible and look for your reflection in your Bible so that you can reflect the image of God's Son in your life. Makes perfect sense, doesn't it?

Thursday:

God's intent is that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known. Ephesians 3:10 (NIV)

Two people are better than one... If one falls down, the other can help him up. But it is bad for the person who is alone and falls, because no one is there to help. Ecclesiastes 4:10 (NCV)

God has given each of you some special abilities; be sure to use them to help each other, passing on to others God's many kinds of blessings. 1 Peter 4:10 (TLB)

Just as there are many parts to our bodies, so it is with Christ's body. We are all parts of it, and it takes every one of us to make it complete, for we each have different work to do. So we belong to each other, and each needs all the others. Romans 12:4-5 (TLB)

Reflection: Today we're going to look at two more of the habits of highly effective followers- practicing community and investing in others. They are very similar categories in a way which is why we're pairing them together today. One is about a word the Bible calls "fellowship" and the other is about something the Bible calls "service".

We don't use the word "fellowship" very often in the 21st century unless we're in church. If you're a Lord Of The Rings fan then you might think of the "Fellowship Of The Ring". Nine companions who would work together to complete a very important task- the destruction of the One Ring in order to save the world. Their fellowship brought together many different skills and abilities but it also brought together many different weaknesses. But as the fellowship worked toward the same goal they overcame their differences and celebrated their strengths and eventually completed the task they had undertaken.

Did you know that if you're a follower of Jesus then you have been given a task? A task you cannot complete on your own. Jesus has given us a community- a "fellowship" of companions whose goal is (supposed to be) the same as yours. To save the world. Not by yourself- but with your companions- one of whom is a man named Jesus. You cannot complete your mission by yourself. You many think you can. You may wish that you could. But you can't. It's all part of Jesus' plan. And even if you think you don't need any help (which is another lesson for another day... everyone will need help at some point on their journey whether you believe it right now or not), what makes you think this is just about you? This is not just about you. Yes, Jesus' plan is for you to go through life in community so that if/when you fall there is someone there to help you up. But His plan is also in place so that when someone else falls, sometimes you will be the one He tasks with the job of helping that person up. It is not just about you. His plan will never succeed if we try to be a bunch of "Lone Ranger" Christians.

Not only that, but you will never move forward in this whole "becoming more and more like Jesus" unless you invest your life in others. This is what the Bible calls service. Jesus says over and over that if you want to find your life you have to lose it. If you want to move up you have to move down. That the greatest will be the servant of all. Your progress will be retarded if you don't make your life about more than yourself. You see it all the time in recovery programs. The people that have recovered their lives and are seen as strong and powerful are almost always those who are helping others. The sponsors try to help those who are not as far down the road to recovery as they are. Often times newcomers will look at these strong people and think, "they're just stronger than I am. I could never be that strong." But they'd be wrong about that. They could be. How? By investing their lives in someone else. By making their life about more than just themselves.

The "strong" people are nothing more than folks who have discovered this secret of fellowship and service. Choosing to belong to a group and do their best to help others on the same road they are walking down. Very much like the Fellowship of the Ring. Are you struggling right now? Do you wonder why you're able to move forward? There could be other reasons but maybe you should ask yourself if you're trying to move forward alone. It never works no matter how badly we want it to. Practice community and invest in others. It's the only way.

Friday:

Give, and you will receive. You will be given much. Pressed down, shaken together, and running over, it will spill into your lap. The way you give to others is the way God will give to you. Luke 6:38 (NCV)

The good man does not escape all troubles- he has them too. But the Lord helps him in each and every one. Psalm 34:19 (TLB)

Whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything. James 1:2-4 (NLT)

Reflection: The last two habits of highly effective followers are practicing generosity and developing sensitive callouses. Yes... I said sensitive callouses and I'll explain what I mean but first, generosity.

The Bible says over and over again that the way we give is directly related to the way we receive. Some cultures call it Karma or maybe you've heard the term, "what goes around comes around?" This is the universal law of planting and harvesting. It works in the physical realm with crops and it works in the metaphysical realm with emotions, habits, feelings & actions. How you give to/treat others will come back to you. When Jesus talks about how the way we give to yoghurts is the way God will give to us He's not just talking about money. Generally that's all you hear if you go to church- money money money money. But generosity is about SO much more than just finances. We can (and should be) generous with our time, energy, thoughts, words, actions and so much more. I always try to remember that the way I "give" to others is the same way God will "give back" to me. I'm not always successful at living up to my values but I have something I'm aiming at.

People who live generous lives end up living amazing lives of faith. They live lives that when others who know them are asked, "who do you admire for their ability to follow Jesus?", their names come up over and over again. One of the number one things I think about when I think of God is that He is GENEROUS. The more I practice generosity in my life the more I become like Him. It's that simple (although simple and easy are not the same thing, are they?).

Ok... now for the fifth characteristic of highly effective followers- developing sensitive callouses. This is all about how a person looks at and handles pain/trouble/suffering/heartache in their lives and the lives of those they are close to. The Bible warns us over and over again that trouble is just part of living in this world. And yet if you watch enough religious television you'll eventually hear someone claiming to speak for God say that if you live your life the right way then you will never have to worry about financial, relational, emotional, physical or spiritual trouble as long as you live.

But that's not what Jesus says:

I have told you these things so you may have peace in me. In this world you will have trouble. But be brave for I have defeated the world! John 16:33 (NCV)

Eventually, we all experience our share of trouble. Why? How much time do you have? We live in a broken world. A world broken by sin. Because of our sin pain entered the world. Heartache, sickness, disease, natural disasters... those things aren't personal- they're just a part of living in a broken world. Then you add to that the personal pain that can be visited upon our lives by other human beings who themselves are in great pain. Sometimes those people that hurt us are targeting us, sometimes it's just who happens to be in their way but pain is pain. Trouble is trouble.

Highly effective followers understand that pain and trouble are part of living in this world. We live with this idea that if we do everything right we will avoid pain but the only guy who ever lived who was able to do everything right still had more than His fair share of pain and heartache and suffering. Then His followers- the people He hand picked and trained Himself-

lived lives filled with heartache and pain and trouble. But they also lived lives of purpose and meaning and joy and love. They had peace in the midst of their trouble and pain because they knew that until Jesus came again and set everything right, this world was going to stay broken and trouble would be part of every life. There isn't a question of whether to live a life of trouble and pain or not. The only question is, will I walk with Jesus through this life? The only One Who can redeem my trouble and pain and make something beautiful out of it.

So that's it. That's how you bloom where you're planted. That's how you embrace the Kingdom life. The six habits of highly effective followers. Sometimes if you practice these things God will eventually transplant you. Sometimes you will stay where you are but He will redeem your situation and change you as together you change the world. Think about the people we talked about on Monday- Israelites exiled to Babylon. People who were just sure that God's plan and their plan HAD to be the same. How could God want them to stay in Babylon? How could He want them to stay in exile? Why would God want them to bloom where they were planted?

800 years after the people of Judah were carried away into exile by the Babylonians a little baby named Jesus was born. He was born in Judah and He lived His life and died in the land of Israel. After His death a little community of people dedicated to His teachings sprouted up in Judah. These teachings of Jesus were the fulfillment of the Old Testament Law & Prophets- a set of teachings that every Israelite had dedicated their lives to, whether they lived in Israel or whether they were still in exile in places like Babylon, Assyria, Persia, Egypt, Turkey, Greece, Rome... even as far away as Spain. This little community of Jesus followers saw amazing growth in the years after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension to Heaven. Scholars think this community grew from 120 people on the day the church began to 200,000 within just a few years. It was like Heaven on earth for these folks- until it wasn't anymore. When the persecutions and executions started these 200,000 people were scattered across the globe. Most of them had Jewish ancestry and so when they finally settled down it was usually among others with Jewish roots who were still in "exile" scattered across the world in small communities of Israelites- each community dedicated to the teachings of the Old Testament.

Do you know what happened when these Jesus followers settled down in these communities of Israelites? They talked about this man named Jesus. The man they claimed was the Messiah all these communities of Jews had been waiting for for thousands of years. The "exile" of Jews that had started 800 years earlier- the people to whom God had said, "settle down and build houses, plant gardens and raise families and seek the prosperity of the land in which you are exiled"- turned out to be a kind of tinder box ready to explode with the message of Jesus. And it did explode. To a large extent because of the these "exiles". God literally changed the world through their exile. How about you? Ever feel like you're in exile? Geographically? Relationally? Physically? Spiritually? What would God say to you? I think I have an idea- I think He'd say, "bloom where you're planted and whether I move you out of that exile or just teach you to thrive where you are, together we will change the world- quite literally."

So bloom. Thrive. Become more and more in every way like Jesus.