

LOOKING UP DAILY DEVOTIONAL - January 25

"Who is the Greatest?" - Mark 9:33-37 & 10:13-16

One of the things I appreciate most about the gospels is seeing Jesus' patience with his disciples. Their story could very well be called "Adventures in Missing the Point" - which honestly gives me a great deal of hope because I know how often I am slow to learn.

In Mark 9:33-37 we come across the disciples having a not-so-secret argument about who was the greatest disciple. When Jesus asked them about it, they fell shamefully silent. Jesus turned this into a teachable moment by sitting the group down...

Mark 9:35-37 He said, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

That settles it, point made, right? Well, flip to the next chapter...

Mark 10:13-16 And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

As much as we want to wag our finger at these disciples - we know that we are no better. Thankfully Jesus is patient. He shows all his disciples that true greatness is not found in reaching for the favour of the higher-ups - but in stooping down to welcome the least, lost and lonely of the world.

Jesus, thank you for being so patient with me. It is tempting to look for the attention and admiration of those who seem important in this world. Help me see through your eyes today - to bless someone ignored by the world but precious to you. Help me follow your path and be a faithful servant in your eyes today. Amen.

Steven Amarin - First Baptist Church Tillsonburg

LOOKING UP DAILY DEVOTIONAL - January 26

"Where you are planted..." - Jeremiah 29

What word would you use to describe our way of life lately? 'Restricted', 'Isolated', 'Waiting'? One word I have heard used is 'Exile' - many of us have found ourselves feeling exiled from all we once enjoyed: travel, shopping, socializing, school, hugging, eating out - and a big one for us Christians is gathering in worship. Whatever the case, many of us feel stuck in a place we don't really want to be. What do we do?

Many years ago the people of Israel found themselves in exile, taken captive by their greatest enemy, the Babylonians. This came as no surprise. For centuries God warned them of their sin and idolatry, He sent prophet after prophet to call the nation to repent and turn back to Him. Finally, God obliged and gave them what they really wanted; a life without Him. He lifted his blessing and protection - the destruction came swiftly, the deportation was heartbreaking. Now stuck in exile, many wondered - is there any hope for us? Then the prophet Jeremiah speaks these these powerful words from the Lord, *"I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future"* (Jer. 29:11).

While many of us misquote this verse to claim immediate blessings, it helps to actually read its context. Right before it we read in verse 10, *"When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place."* Imagine being given a promise that would take 70 years to be fulfilled...for most of us that would be far beyond our lifetime. This wasn't about instant gratification, immediate blessings - God's purpose was to shape a new generation of people who would be devoted to Him, a generation ready for revival and the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

So, what were they to do in this time of exile? Sulk, complain, sit and wait for a better day? We look back a few more verses, v.5 *"Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Marry and have sons and daughters [...] 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"* (Jer. 29:5-7).

Quite simply, these people were to blossom where they were planted! As you think about this time of exile in which we live and the place you have found yourself - in what ways is God calling you to do the same?

Heavenly Father, my temptation these days is to look down at all the problems - help me to look up to You. Help me to see how You want to work in my waiting. May this time of exile not be wasted on sulking and self-pity but rather a time of building up and preparing me for what lies ahead. In Jesus' name, Amen!

Steven Amarin - First Baptist Church Tillsonburg

LOOKING UP DAILY DEVOTIONAL - January 27

"Truly Thankful" - 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Someone asked me this fascinating question several years ago: "What if the only things you had today were the things you thanked God for yesterday?" This struck me in that moment because I realized if it were true, I would have nothing. Thankfully, God in his abundant grace, delights in giving good gifts to his children (Luke 11:11-13, James 1:17) and does not put such conditions on his blessings.

But what about us? Are we truly thankful?

Some time ago I found myself in a bit of a slump one day. Maybe you can relate? I felt a prompting to start to write down a list of the things I am grateful to God for. In my gloomy disposition that day I didn't think I would find much. I wrote five, then twenty, then to my surprise, about fifty things. Interestingly, the longer the list became, the less it was about worldly things and more it became about aspects of God's nature and the fact I could know Him personally. This exercise brought a profound sense of joy that I had not experienced before.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 we read, "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

While our circumstances change and things come and go, God's will for us is to be grateful in spite of them. Our rejoicing, prayer and thankfulness will be steady if they are rooted in Him.

Heavenly Father, You really have been good to me, despite what my heart sometimes feels. Even in the midst of challenging circumstances I can be grateful for Your presence and that You can work all things together for the good. As I think of the many things I am grateful for today - I admit that there are probably a million-and-one more things I haven't even noticed. But, of all these things, I am most grateful that You are God and that You have reached down to show Your love to me. Thank You.

Steven Amarin - First Baptist Church Tillsonburg

LOOKING UP DAILY DEVOTIONAL - January 28

"Timely Wisdom" - Ecclesiastes 3, James 1

When we feel at a loss for words it sometimes helps to read the words of those who have gone before us. One of my favourite sections of the Bible has often been called "Wisdom Literature". It is comprised of books like the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon - words that date back as far as 3400 years ago. Here, we find the wisdom of the ages, words that have stood the test of time and have brought comfort and guidance to God's people for millennia. Pause and consider...

For everything there is a season, a and a time for every matter under heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die;

A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal;

A time to break down, and a time to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh;

A time to mourn, and a time to dance;

A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

A time to seek, and a time to lose;

A time to keep, and a time to cast away;

A time to tear, and a time to sew;

A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

A time to love, and a time to hate;

A time for war, and a time for peace. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

Here is a reminder that under heaven we will have seasons of beauty and brokenness. It is a reminder to cherish the good times while we have them - and a reminder that however challenging a time might be, it too shall pass. It takes wisdom to know what kind of season it is and wisdom to navigate it well - thankfully in every season God is always willing to provide it to those who ask (James 1:5).

Heavenly Father, this has been quite a season... as I consider Ecclesiastes 3 it seems as though this particular season has swung more to the negatives than the positives. I need your wisdom more than ever to see this season through and make it to the next. Help me today Lord, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Steven Amorin - First Baptist Church Tillsonburg

LOOKING UP DAILY DEVOTIONAL - January 29

"God's Workmanship"

Some time ago my wife and I visited a glass art gallery. I didn't know what to expect as my frame of reference for anything glass was stuff like windows, cups and mason jars. As I walked from exhibit to exhibit I was blown away by how creative, intricate and colourful these pieces of art were. A thought crossed my mind as I considered how they were crafted by the glass blowers who had made them. It got me thinking about how God forms us and a contrast started to form in my mind between something like a Mason jar and a piece of glass art:

Mason jars are all basically the same; each piece of glass art is unique. Mason jars are molded by outside pressure; glass art is formed from within by the breath of the artist. Mason jars are cheaply made; each piece of glass art is highly valuable because of the skill and time it takes to craft - a skilled artisan can take inexpensive dusty sand and form it into something of great value...I'll quickly add that mason jars have big mouths and screwy tops! I think you get the idea...

As you walk this road of life, how are you being formed? Are you like a mason jar or a piece of art? Have you allowed the outside pressure of the world force you into its mold? Or, have you welcomed the Holy Spirit to work within your life to transform you from the inside - to be the unique person God made you to be?

In Ephesians 2:10 we read, "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." The original Greek word 'poiema' we translate to 'workmanship' can also be translated as 'masterpiece' or 'work of art'. In a profound way, God takes the raw material of who we are and breathes life into us by the Holy Spirit, forming us into His unique masterpiece!

Heavenly Father, Your word teaches me that You, "work in us to will and to act according to Your good pleasure." Your Word also teaches me that I am to, "Be filled with the Holy Spirit." I welcome your indwelling, transforming, life-filling presence today. I don't want to be a product of this world - I would rather be Your work of art. As you work in my life may I fulfill my purpose and shine the goodness of Jesus Christ. In his name I pray, Amen.

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