

Classis Lake Erie

Agenda Supplement

October 7, 2017

Stated Clerk

1. Classis will meet on Thursday, November 9, 2017, at All Nations Community Church (5260 Hill Ave, Toledo, OH 43615). The meeting will begin at 4:00 p.m. The purpose of the meeting will be to conduct several examinations for ministers of the Word.
2. The Ecclesiastical Credential for Rev. Dave Spoelma has been processed and forwarded to Classis Holland. Dave accepted a call from Calving CRC, Holland, Michigan.

Leadership Development

Student Funding

We request funding for the following seminary students in the amounts detailed below:

1. Seong Jun Kim
Seong Jun's home congregation is Ann Arbor Hope. He and his wife, Young Ja, have one child. Seong Jun begins his second year of study in CTS's MDiv program this fall.
Recommended: **\$6,000.00**
2. Brad Stolman
Brad is on staff at Dearborn Christian Fellowship. He and his wife, Lisa, have four boys. Brad begins his second year of MDiv studies by distance education at Reformed Theological Seminary this fall. Brad is concurrently enrolled in CTS's EPMC program.
Recommended: **\$11,000.00**

Total for 2017/2018: **\$17,000.00**

Disbursements for 2016/2017:	4 Students: \$15,015.00
Disbursements for 2015/2016:	3 Students: \$13,800.00
Disbursements for 2014/2015:	4 Students: \$28,400.00

Please note: Cost of tuition for full-time study in Calvin Theological Seminary's MDiv program is approximately **\$15,972.00**.

Please recall that at our October, 2012 meeting, Classis decided to return to past precedent and cap all student assistance at 50% of the tuition costs of each student. For the past five years the mandate of Classis has also been to limit the Student Fund's total annual disbursement to approximately \$30,000.00.

New Church Development

UPDATE on Detroit Kingdom Enterprise Zone

Pastor Jon Beyer (Grace Network in Ann Arbor, MI) and Pastor Dan Jongsma (Dearborn Christian Fellowship) have served as co-leaders for this particular zone since 2011. The purpose of these zones is to foster collaborative work between the CRC and the RCA that intentionally strengthens our existing churches and helps start new churches. A Detroit Lead Team was formed and met for several years to assist in fulfilling this mission. What follows is two ongoing results and efforts of the Detroit KEZ:

- **Hesed Community Church** – this church planting work has continued to develop and bear fruit over the past six months. Nate Bull and Mark Van Andel continue to partner in this joint RCA/CRC venture. After completing his seminary training, Mark has now been freed to work more regularly in the neighborhood. From the ministry house at 22044 Lyndon St. in Detroit, Nate and Mark Van Andel host a weekly lunch and Bible study at noon on Thursdays for the past year. Out of this gathering, four faithful neighborhood servants were identified and invited into an intense discipleship process that meets on Fridays at 10 a.m. Each disciple is reading one Gospel a week and memorizing one of Paul's epistles.

This neighborhood ministry is also networked with other neighborhood ministries in other communities through Mark's relational connections. On the last Sunday of each month, these groups gather for a corporate worship service to celebrate the sacraments, hear the preached word and enjoy the fellowship of other local believers across the city. Nate and Mark are available to preach in local CRCs when the need arises. They desire to be connected to other churches in the Classis for mutual encouragement. Contact them at: hesedcc@gmail.com.

- **A Leadership Development Learning Community (LDLC)** has been formed with four participating churches. In order to be effective, churches need leaders at all levels, serving in all areas of ministry, inside and outside the walls of the church. With this in mind, a LDLC was launched in August 2016. Over the next two years, this group will gather four times for two-day retreats (Friday – Saturday). The LDLC is comprised of senior pastors and ministry leaders (a team of 3-5 ministry leaders from each church) who are

passionate about developing a leadership pipeline that will work within their specific context. Pastor Eddy Aleman, Director of Leadership Development in the RCA, and Pastor Jon Beyer oversee this learning community. On-going coaching is also provided in between gatherings to encourage and empower teams forward toward execution of their action plans.

Respectfully submitted by Rev. Dan Jongsma
Chairperson of the New Church Development Committee

Candidate Sermons

see following pages . . .

Juli Stuelpnagel
Catechism Sermon
1 Corinthians 15: 1-15

Resurrection Hope

Visiting people in the hospital, I have heard many stories about people's lives. One lady, I'll call her Ellen, told me about her life. She told me about making some bad choices in her youth. She told me about the motorcycle accident in her twenties that left her permanent injuries. The accident left her, a single mom, trying to cope with physical limitations, while raising her daughter. She told me about a recent failed surgery, leaving her in even more pain. She also told me about parents who loved her and stuck by her, even in all the struggles. She then told me, how despite her wayward youth, she had rekindled the faith she had been taught as a child. She talked about how that same faith now gave her hope, despite the recent failed surgery. Her faith rooted her and gave her hope.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul also talks about faith. For Paul, faith is foundational for belief in the resurrection. And the resurrection is foundational for Christianity. For Paul, the story of faith and the resurrection go hand in hand.

Someone once quipped that Christianity is a religion in which you have to believe 10 impossible things before breakfast each morning. I don't know just what ten things this person had in mind, but surely one of these impossible things must be the resurrection – Jesus' resurrection from the dead, and the promise that we will be raised from the dead too. The central claim of the Christian faith is that Jesus who was dead, dead as door nail on Friday afternoon, was full of life on the following Sunday. He had been raised from the dead and could now walk and talk and eat fish with his disciples. It shatters all logic. This idea of the resurrection breaks

the mold of our previous experience. And yet, this is precisely what the Christian faith says happened.

Oh there are many who doubt the resurrection. They come up with various explanations. Jesus didn't really die, it just looked like it. Or, the disciples made up the resurrection. It wasn't an actual resurrection. The resurrection was just a way to express a desire to continue living Christ's teachings. Yes, for many people today, the resurrection is just too impossible to believe. Faith? Faith in the resurrection? That seems crazy. They want proof. Of course, many of us would probably love to have some proof. Wouldn't that just make things easier? Wouldn't that ease those doubts that creep in now and then? Wouldn't it be nice to have some evidence, some proof that the resurrection happened? But the fact of the matter is there is no concrete proof. What we do have is the Bible. We do have the story of God's work in our world.

This is where Paul begins in 1 Corinthians 15. He begins by reminding the Corinthians of the story that they know, and are a part of. He begins by reminding them of Christ. In verses 3-4 he says: "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures." Paul starts out reminding the Corinthians of what they know. He reminds them what they have been taught. Paul himself has preached the gospel to them. He loves this church. He wants them to fully embrace their faith. Yet, some of them have come to have doubts about the resurrection. Do they not get it? Do they not see the whole picture?

Paul virtually cries out in exasperation. "How can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" Well, to tell the truth, it probably wasn't so hard for the Corinthians to say this. It didn't fit their experience, any more than it does for people today. Especially troublesome would have been the idea of a bodily resurrection. In Greek culture of that time, the

body was typically seen as a prison for the soul. In death, the soul could finally be liberated. With this mindset, the idea of a bodily resurrection was not hopeful. It was not something they would easily embrace. Yet, for Paul, the resurrection is foundational for the Christian faith.

So Paul starts his argument in support of the resurrection. And, at first, it could almost sound like Paul is trying to offer some proof. “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” Paul is basically saying something like this: “Maybe you are right. Maybe you Corinthians are right and all of this resurrection talk is a bunch of baloney. Maybe when I preached to you that Christ was raised from the dead and that you who belong to Christ will be raised too, maybe I was way out of line. But if I was, then your faith is in vain.”

Paul isn’t offering some irrefutable philosophical proof. What Paul is doing is setting them in the present. He is throwing them onto their experience. Throwing them onto their faith. “If you want to know if the resurrection is true,” Paul says, “look around you.” “Can you see the risen Christ in your own experience? Look through the eyes of faith. That is the way to know the resurrection is true.”

At the heart of knowing and believing the resurrection is faith. God is not just seen when we draw a line in the sand and say, “give me proof or I don’t step over the line.” God is experienced when we step over the line in trust. God comes to us in the relationship of trust that we call faith. Hebrews 11 tells us that faith is “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we believe.” It is in faith, it is in this relationship of trust, that we encounter Christ. When we encounter that Christ, when we experience the power of that presence, then we know in faith that Christ is raised from the dead and our faith is not in vain.

But Paul doesn't just stop with this. For inevitably there is that question that always seems to materialize. Why? Why have faith? What does the resurrection do for us? This is something that many of the Reformers also considered. Question 45 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks "How does Christ's resurrection benefit us? The catechism does not lay out the problems with the resurrection and how to overcome them. Rather, from a foundation of faith in Christ, it asks how the resurrection benefits us.

The first benefit listed in the Heidelberg Catechism is that "By his resurrection he has overcome death, so that he might make us share in the righteousness he won for us by his death." The mystery of the death of Jesus Christ became plain with the resurrection. With the resurrection, the disciples saw that the crucifixion was not just a horrible mistake. Jesus was not some idealistic martyr, but a savior. His death had a purpose. Christ came that we might live.

In the resurrection, we see that death is not the final answer. Towards the end of the chapter, Paul tells us that "Death has been swallowed up in victory." Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thank be to God! He gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." In Christ, death has been overcome. Christ is victorious.

Sure, right now people still die. And death is often feared. But with the resurrection, death is not the final answer. Death would be terrifying if we had to believe that when we breathed our last that that was simply the end. Without hope from beyond the grave, this would be all there is. But if we believe that Jesus has conquered death through the power of God, and that his victory can be communicated to us...then all of life and eternity becomes meaningful.

With the resurrection, we have hope. For we know there is something beyond death. We don't just sing songs of lament when we attend a funeral. Yes, there is still sadness. We still

mourn our loved ones. But there is more than just despair, there is also hope. In Christ and his resurrection, there is hope, for death is not the final answer. One day, death will be destroyed.

In the movie, the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, there is a scene depicting this destruction of death. As you may remember, in this movie, four children, Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy are in the land of Narnia. Peter, Susan, and Lucy make plans to find Aslan, the lion. Edmund, however, steals away to see the White Witch. For he had met her on a previous visit. But the White Witch treats Edmund harshly when he arrives without his siblings, and sets out in pursuit of them. Yet, with Aslan on the move, her power over Narnia is failing. The other children reach Aslan, and are able to rescue Edmund just as the witch is about to kill him. Calling for a truce, the witch demands that Edmund be returned to her, as an ancient law (the "Deep magic") gives her possession of all traitors. Aslan offers himself in Edmund's place, and the witch accepts. Aslan is sacrificed by the witch, but comes back to life through "Deeper magic": when one who is blameless, willingly dies on behalf of the guilty, he may return to life

And even death itself will turn backwards. As Aslan was sacrificed in place of Edmund, we see that Death was not the final answer there. Likewise, the crucifixion of Christ was not the end of the story. With the Resurrection, death is turned backward. It is overcome. And with the Resurrection of Christ we also have a "guarantee of our glorious resurrection," which the Heidelberg Catechism lists as the third benefit. Christ will come again. We will one day reign with Christ. We will have eternal life. The story is far from over. There is a glorious future to look forward to.

1 Corinthians 20 tells us that "Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. Paul uses the word "firstfruits." This vivid image comes from the Law of Moses. At the start of the harvest the Israelites were required to bring the best of the

firstfruits of the soil to the house of the LORD. The firstfruits was a promise of more to come, that God would bless His people with a full harvest. The resurrected Christ is the firstfruits. He is the promise of more to come. Because He has arisen from the dead, all in Christ will also arise from the dead. This is not just some spiritual existence. It is a bodily resurrection. We might not know exactly what this will look like, but we do know that this resurrection of believers is the result of the resurrection and proof of the final victory over death.

We also know that because Christ has risen, we can have new life. And this new life is more than a promised eternal life. It is more than this future glorious resurrection. The Heidelberg Catechism gets at this idea in its second benefit. “By his power we too are already now resurrected to a new life.” When we give ourselves over to Christ, we die to ourselves, but God raises us up. Without Christ, we would remain dead in our sins. In Christ, we are forgiven. We are given new life.

Baptism is a symbol of this new life in Jesus Christ. Baptism is a sign to us of our dying and rising with Christ. Romans 6:4 says “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” In baptism, we can get a sense of how important Christ’s death and resurrection is. Christ’s death was not the end of the story. Christ has risen. He has overcome death. And, in Christ, we have new life.

What a wonderful picture. In many ways, this sounds like a good place to end. We have been made new. Death is overcome. We will share in Christ’s glorious resurrection. You would think that after a chapter with this kind of message that Paul would end with something like “So let’s rejoice at the wonderful hope we have to look forward to.” But he doesn’t. It is wonderful hope, to be sure. It is something to look forward to. But, the truth about the resurrection of the

dead and the transformation of the living, is not just about future hope. It's also a truth that has implications today.

And so it is with this idea that Paul ends this chapter on the resurrection. In verse 58, he says "Therefore, my dear brothers (and sisters), stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." Give your selves fully to the work of the Lord. The resurrection has implications today. The resurrection does not give us license to just sit back in our easy chairs and watch the world go by. It is not an invitation to say "I can do whatever I want, it doesn't matter. Christ will forgive me. I'm saved. " The resurrection does matter in the here and now.

If we truly believe the resurrection, then we cannot discount the present life. In so many ways, the resurrection, gives meaning to what we do now. It gives meaning to our worship. It gives meaning to our serving one another – the poor, the sick, the downtrodden. It gives us meaning when we are a tired or discouraged or lonely. It gives us meaning when we are struggling to live as we know we should. The resurrection gives meaning to our lives and to our faith.

Yes, the resurrection is important. It isn't something to be confined to Easter Sunday. It is something that affects all of life. It gives us hope now, and in the future. And there is a comfort in this. There is a comfort in knowing that Christ has overcome death and that we have new life in him. In knowing that God will take the various strands of our lives and weave them in to the glorious tapestry of his new creation.

And there is a comfort in know that our lives are a part of a larger story- God's story. And this story is a story of faith and hope. Our lives, our stories, should testify to the power of the risen Christ. They should illustrate the importance of faith and the importance of the

resurrection. And so, may we recognize Christ calling us to open our hearts to receive him and to open our eyes to the resurrection light. Amen.

Great is Thy Faithfulness

Many of us have experienced change. I know I have. Every time I moved things changed. I had to find a place to live, find my way around a new town, make new friends. It wasn't always easy. But, there were a lot positives as well. Moving meant a fresh start. I would meet new people, learn new things. In many ways, it was a time of hope. Hope. I like hope. And I'm sure I'm not alone in that. So, why then would I choose to read from the book of Lamentations? The title of the book itself, doesn't necessarily fit with our ideas of hope.

Lamentations. Probably not the place most of us are used to turning to in our devotions or bible studies. Much of the book deals with judgment against Judah, who had turned to idols and forsaken the Lord. In Lamentations, the author laments the sins of the nation of Judah.

The author of Lamentations has traditionally been thought to be the prophet Jeremiah. In this book, the writer seems to be surveying the rubble of what was the capital city of Jerusalem. The Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar had held Jerusalem under siege for three years, slowly squeezing the life out of it. In 586 B.C., the Jewish defense collapsed and the invaders overran the city, destroying buildings, ransacking the holy places, capturing the people and dragging them into exile.

Grief, anger, discouragement, anxiety and hopelessness come flooding out of the writer. He is overwhelmed by the devastation and loss that surrounds him. Things just don't seem to be turning out the way they should. This is Israel, God's chosen people, yet now Jerusalem, the City of God is destroyed. Why has God allowed all of this suffering?

We learn early on in Lamentations 1:8 that the reason for all this suffering is that God has allowed punishment to come on his people because of their disobedience to the Lord. Time after time

they have ignored him and turned their backs on him. And God, the sovereign God, has finally allowed his people to suffer the consequences of their waywardness.

The writer of Lamentations equated the fall of Jerusalem with the sinfulness of Israel and judgment of God. It would be tempting and easy for many to blame the wicked Nebuchadnezzar, but as far as the writer was concerned, the people of Judah had brought it on themselves.

Why then read something like this today? Who wants to hear about judgment? Doesn't this sound a bit harsh? What happened to hope? Yet, in the middle of Lamentations, we find that there is more than just judgment. There is hope – hope in a sovereign and faithful God. The good news is that God is faithful and has not left them. He will eventually restore them and draw them back to himself.

In Lamentations, God is also present as someone who loves his wayward people in spite of their sinfulness. There is more than divine judgment in this chapter. Because in verses 22-24, there is also an affirmation of God's very nature- his love. If the writer had not experienced these characteristics, he could not have written 3:22-24, and he could not have affirmed the greatness of God's unfailing love. Note that the poet's affirmation comes at the center of the book, in the midst of the middle chapter. Perhaps this placement is a clue, although a small one, that God's love and faithfulness are ultimately the center of existence for a believer.

Imagine how this must have sounded to the ancient Hebrews standing amidst the ruins of the Holy City. At the time of this writing the Hebrew people are in captivity in Babylon. They are separated from their homeland. Their temple has been destroyed. The institutions that defined their lives have been disrupted, or lay in ruins in their homeland. It's a time of anxiety and fear, a time that no doubt tried their souls and challenged their very identity. Needless to say, things are not looking good at all. This is hardly a time of national optimism.

But then, in spite of all that surrounds the writer, we hear the words, “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

These simple lines here in the middle of Lamentations are more than mere words. They are a confession of faith, a strong and lasting declaration of what they Hebrew people believe. Yet, what grounds are there for making this claim? The writer has no grounds to make this claim, but for this one thing: The memory of God’s actions in the past; the memory of God’s deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt; the memory of God’s gracious provision of manna in the wilderness, when there was no other food; the memory of a cloud of darkness by day and a pillar of fire by night, sent to guide them, for there were no roads or maps to travel by. The memory and knowledge of God’s covenant faithfulness to Israel.

These lines are a testimony of God’s faithfulness. They would have spoken to the people of Judah, and these same words still speak to us today.

As we look at the world around us, there is much pain and suffering. Storms and earthquakes that have destroyed the lives of many. Violence has spiked in Iraq again, and things in Afghanistan are more than tough. Violence and racial tension in the US.

And some of this suffering has invaded our lives, or the lives of people we love. Sometimes, like the writer of Lamentations, we stand and survey the losses that surround us.

- After all that anxious waiting, the biopsy comes back positive.
- Or the company we have invested so much time and energy in “downsizes” and we are without a job?
- Someone close to us dies, and we are left alone.
- Loneliness and depression sneak into our lives and won’t let go.

Pain and suffering may be all around us, but then, in the midst of all of this, again imagine the words of Lamentations 3: “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

Things aren’t always easy. We have our struggles, but God’s love, God’s compassion, and God’s infinite mercy, are constant, unchanging and dependable – something you can count on when everything is falling apart.

Yes, these words do apply to us today. And, like the writer of Lamentations, we also have grounds for this confession of faith in the midst of our trials. When things change, we often look around. When I moved, I often did look back at where I had been, but also looked ahead to the future. But, this is more than just looking back at what events we have gone through personally. We can also remember many of the events the church year is centered around. Advents, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost. During the seasons of advent and Christmas, we often sing the words “O come, O come Immanuel.” Immanuel or “God with us.” Yes, God is with us. God sent his son into the world. But, Christmas and the birth of Christ is not the whole story. We also remember that Jesus was later crucified. He died for us. Jesus, the Son of God, paid the penalty for our sins. And then, three days later, he rose again. In Christ, then, we are saved. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, we can look forward to eternal life with God.

In the birth, the crucifixion, and the resurrection we can see God’s love and faithfulness to us, even today. Knowing all that Christ has done for us, we too can speak these words of hope from Lamentations. “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Remembering God’s love and faithfulness to us we too can speak these words.

These words of the writer, the words about the steadfast love of the Lord, introduce a key term in the theological thinking of the O.T., Chesed. This word doesn’t have an exact English equivalent. It

has been translated as “steadfast love” or “loving-kindness” or “covenant loyalty.” One source I read put it this way, Chesed is the “consistent, ever-faithful, relentless, constantly-pursuing, lavish, extravagant, unrestrained love of God.”

That is what it means to believe in a sovereign God. That is what God’s Chesed is about. A capricious and arbitrary God might embrace a person one moment, and then leave them stranded the next. But a sovereign, faithful God, our God, is like a loving parent who watches over us night and day – when we are sleeping and when we are awake. A sovereign God pours out his blessings both when we are at our best and all those times that we fall short. A sovereign God is always present in our times of joy and in times of sorrow and pain.

It is not always easy. It’s sometimes hard to believe that God is there by your side when the rug is pulled out from under you. Yet, think of it this way: Just as the sun comes up every morning, God pours out his love on us. And just as the sun is shining, even though there is sometimes a thick layer of clouds blocking it from our view, so God is watching over us, even when God seems distant and far away. Yes, God is faithful.

Faithfulness. In many ways, this seems to be what these verses of Lamentations are about. “Faithfulness” relates to the Lord’s being true to his word of promise. It describes behavior that is reliable and consistent, never deviating from the norm. This is the nature of God. And this faithfulness is testified in many of our songs and hymns. As I read these verses I thought of the words of the well-known hymn, “Great is thy Faithfulness.”

In 1941, Thomas Chisholm, the author of this hymn wrote a letter which tells of his “morning by morning” realization of God’s personal faithfulness in his daily life. Here, he wrote: “My income has never been large at any time due to impaired health in the earlier years which has followed me on until now. But I must not fail to record here the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant keeping God and that He

has given me many wonderful displays of His providing care which have filled me with astonishing gratefulness.” Things weren’t always easy, but God was always faithful.

And, I have seen evidence of people living in the knowledge of God’s faithfulness other places as well. A few years ago, I worked as a chaplain at a nursing home in Fargo, ND. While I was there, I met a 95 year old lady named Ruth. Ruth showed me a book that she was writing about her life. The title of her book was “God’s Faithfulness.” As I read the book, I was struck by how she saw God’s faithfulness in so many areas of her life. What she chronicled in her book was not always “happy.” She wrote about the love she had for her children, but she also wrote about the loneliness she felt when her son moved to Germany. She wrote about a sudden illness that had struck her several years before. She was alone in her apartment, unable to move. She then wrote how she saw God at work in the situation, as a staff person felt called to come check on her that morning. She wrote of many difficult and scary times in her life. Yet, looking back, the thing that she really saw was God’s faithfulness. Ruth saw how God had been with her throughout all of these situations. Ruth, like the writer of Lamentations, could see God’s love and faithfulness even when things weren’t easy.

Throughout the year, in all the changes that take place, Lamentations holds lessons for us. There have been struggles and disappointments in the past. There will be struggles and disappointments in the future. Yet one thing never changes. God. God is faithful. So, in times of joy and in times of pain, in times of laughter and times of mourning, we can testify to God’s faithfulness. It isn’t always easy. We might not always feel like it, but may we, like the author of Lamentations, like my friend Ruth, be able to say to God “Great is Thy Faithfulness.”

Law and Grace

Growing up, I remember seeing some wooden puzzles on my Dad's workbench. Not jigsaw puzzles, but puzzles something similar to these. (Show puzzles) Puzzles that involved putting things back together or puzzles that involved trying to get the ring off the sticks, or passing a bead from one side to the other. I was fascinated by these puzzles. I would work hard to figure out the solution. I wanted to know the answer. And so, over and over, I would try. I would try everything I could. I'd force it. I'd twist it. I'd turn it. None of which worked. I would try every possible solution that I could think of. Somehow, I thought, if I just keep trying long enough. If I just work hard enough, somehow, this has to work. I knew it could be done, and I just wanted to know how.

My Dad, of course, knew how to solve them. He would put it back together in seconds. He'd turn his back for just a moment, then hand it back to me, puzzle solved. "See how easy it is." He would say. At the time, it really didn't seem so easy. After all, nothing I ever tried seem to work. And so, I'd keep bugging my Dad for the answer. I would just keep asking "Why won't this work." "What do I have to do?" I kept wanting the solution...I wanted to know how it could be done.

In our text, the Rich young Ruler is also looking for answers. The ruler wants to know what he has to do. And so, he comes to Jesus and asks "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life." Now, this ruler is likely someone with status in society. He is well to do. He is high up on the ladder of success. He would have been on the list of "Who's who in Jewish society." And, this man comes to Jesus for answers. He wants to know how he can be sure he will saved when God passes out the gift of life. He wants to know what it is he needs to do to get eternal life. He wants answers.

Jesus addresses the man's questions. It isn't necessarily addressed the way we would expect. He might address it in a bit of roundabout way, at least from our perspective. But he does address it. He does answer the man's questions.

"Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." The issue of goodness raises the question of honoring God. If the ruler desires to truly follow God, then he should respond to the one who brings his teaching.

Jesus then responds to the ruler by listing some of the commandments. "No one is good, Jesus says, except God alone. You know the commandments; Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother." The ruler has asked what he can do to be saved, and Jesus responds with the law, which in Judaism, reflected God's will. If one is going to earn eternal life, then acts of righteousness would be required. And this is the answer the ruler is searching for. He was searching for what acts he would need to do to earn eternal life. He wants to know the answer of how he can be saved.

These commandments would have been known by the man, by anyone in Jewish society. And so when Jesus lists these commandments, this sparks a response from the ruler. "All of these I have kept since I was a boy." Can't you just see this young man, standing a bit straighter, puffing his chest out a bit? With a proud voice he tells Jesus "I've already done that." This man is looking to earn eternal life, and, In fact, he was pretty sure he already had.

Now, when Jesus heard the ruler's claim of obeying the commandments, he responds by saying: "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

This was not what the ruler wanted to hear. When the ruler heard what Jesus suggested, he was very sad. After all, he had a lot of money. And having a lot of money, he would have been valued in society. If he gave everything up he would be giving up a lot more than a pile of coins. It would mean

giving up status. It would mean giving up things that were important to him, things that he felt made him who he was.

Now focusing on things is hardly unique to the rich young ruler. There are plenty of examples of such actions in our world today. Status and things weren't just important then. It is prevalent in our culture today. It is easy today to want more things. To think if we just had more money, if we just had a bigger house, if we just had a little more knowledge, then things would be okay.

So, just what is Jesus saying here? Is giving away everything the answer to the young ruler's question? Is that really what it takes? Looking further at the text, it isn't really about the money. It isn't just about the stuff. What is hard for the rich, for someone climbing the social ladder, is getting rid of the idea that they can buy their way in. What's hard is getting rid of the idea is that the kingdom of heaven is just another thing to acquire. What's hard is thinking this something to be earned

And so, knowing all this, Jesus looked at him and said "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Indeed it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." Camel? Needle? Just what is this all about? Is a camel going to really get through the eye of the needle? I have read some suggestions that Jesus was referring to something in Jerusalem called a "Needle Gate." In fact, I remember a Bible story book I had as a child that also suggested it. I can still remember the picture that accompanied it – a camel kneeling down to fit through a small camel shaped gate in the wall.

Is this what Jesus is talking about? In all likelihood, no. Most commentaries I've read, now say that there really isn't evidence that such a gate existed. There are also some theological issues with this idea. If this is what Jesus is referring to then, if a camel was lean enough and was able to perfect a kneeling walk, he could squeeze through that gate. In other words, this would make Jesus' words the equivalent of "If you just try hard enough, you will get there." "It might not be easy, but you can do this." But the notion of trying harder is not the point Jesus is making. This is an example of hyperbole.

And, it is hardly the only one that Jesus used. There are other examples of Jesus using the ridiculous to convey important theological truths. For example, the idea of someone walking around with a log in their eye, yet worried about a speck of sawdust in someone else's eye.

Getting the camel through the needle's eye is not a matter of technique. It isn't a matter of trying harder. It isn't like my Dad's puzzles that fascinated me as a kid. There, if I had kept trying long enough I very well might have lucked out and found the solution. With enough effort (and likely a few hints along the way) I could find the answer. But that is not what Jesus is talking about. This isn't something that with enough effort the camel might somehow squeeze through the needle. This isn't about working hard. This isn't about the camel at all.

Camels don't go through eyes of needles. Jesus response is shocking. It is meant to be shocking. It is meant to be impossible. Otherwise, the following statement wouldn't make sense. For in v 27, Jesus replied "What is impossible with men is possible with God." But this isn't about human beings.

Things aren't so impossible with God. There is another way. It's called grace. God's grace. For, what is impossible for men, is possible for God." Jesus answers the dilemma of who can be saved. He answers the problem of how to get eternal life. The situation is not hopeless, because of God's power and grace. What human beings cannot do, God can.

This statement "what is impossible with men is possible with God" shifts the entire discussion away from human possibility to the dimension of divine grace. Quite simply, this isn't about us. It isn't about our efforts. It isn't about some secret answer to the puzzle. It's about God and His grace. Nobody enters the kingdom of God through their own assets or their own efforts, but through God. Salvation is ultimately not the result of human action, not even of the radical action of giving away everything, but of divine grace.

The idea of grace can be seen in the movie (and book) *Babette's feast*. The movie, *Babette's feast* is set in the 1900's in a remote and impoverished Danish village. It centers around two sisters: Martine and Philippa, the daughters of the Dean of a strict Christian sect. As young women, each of the sisters had had a failed love affair with a man from the "outside" world. Now, years later, the two women are still alone. Their Father is dead, and they struggle to hold together his splintering church.

One night a fugitive Frenchwoman arrives half dead on the sister's doorstep. They take her in, and she lives with them for twelve years as their servant, until she wins ten thousand francs in the French lottery. She then asks the sisters for permission to cook the Deans' remaining disciples a real French dinner in honor of what would have been the Dean's 100th birthday. The sisters reluctantly agree, although they, along with the others from the congregations, vow to receive no pleasure from it.

One of the guests is a general. This general is the one, who as a young Calvary officer had fallen for Martine. The General also is the only one at the table who appreciates the meal Babette prepares. In the middle of the meal, the general gives a speech – a speech about grace. In it he says: "But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, as we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it with gratitude."

Everyone else is busy trying to not taste and not being astonished by the meal. And yet, as the night goes on, changes slowly happen. The congregation had put up all sorts of wary walls against Babette's gift. But the gift is inescapable. It transforms the brothers and sisters in spite of themselves. Slowly, they experience the gracious gift of the meal.

Near the end of the movie, the congregation gathers outside. They join hands and sing the old songs of faith. It is a communion scene. Babette's feast had opened the gate and grace stole in. The felt, the author states, "as if they had indeed had their sins washed white as wool." The congregation experienced grace from the Babette's meal.

The meal cost the members of the congregation nothing. It cost Babette everything. For Babette spent every bit of the 10,000 francs she had earned on the meal. Babette's Feast is a story of grace: a gift that cost the giver everything and the recipient nothing. A gift of grace. Grace, that as stated by the general is infinite. It isn't something to be earned. It is free.

That's what grace is all about: it is a free, totally unmerited gift. Eternal life isn't something we can earn. Reading the right books, accomplishing the right tasks isn't the answer. It isn't because of something we have done or will do. As the Heidelberg Catechism states, "This reward is not earned; it is a gift of grace." The miracle of divine grace.

On our own, we are never going to make it. God's grace isn't a puzzle to be solved. It isn't something we are going to attain by our own efforts. It isn't a matter of trying harder or longer. It is a gift of grace. God's grace. On our own it is totally impossible for us to enter the kingdom of God. The odds for all of us are zero. But with God, thanks to grace, the odds are infinite. As Ephesians 2: 8. states "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this not your own doing; it is the gift of God."

This is the point that the ruler failed to see. Eternal life isn't something to be earned. On his own, he wasn't going to make it. He needed God. The ruler was trying to put his faith and hope in things. He wasn't really ready to put his faith in God. And without completely opening his heart to God, he wasn't able to really experience the miracle of God's grace.

By putting our faith in God, we open ourselves up to experience the miracle of God's infinite Grace. As we leave here and go about our lives, may we remember the gift of God's Grace. May we experience this gift in our lives. May God and his grace lead us and guide us in all we do. Amen.

Refresh My Soul...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UoOtqAus1YM>

“My World Needs You” (Official Lyric Video) Feat. Tamela Mann, Tasha Cobbs, and Sarah Reeves

Psalm 23 (NIV)

“The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me beside quiet water,
He refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil
For you are with me;
Your rod and your staff,
They comfort me.
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup overflows.
Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Trouble in the text

It is “sadly curious that the 23rd Psalm, the Psalm that invites us to lie down in green pastures... to be led beside quiet waters... to restore our souls... Is the psalm [that is often] read... when we die...”

“...That we have to wait our whole life... and only when dead... are granted the full permission to lie down, to rest, to have our souls restored... You only get to hear the psalm about rest when you die...”¹

It seems the Psalmist understood what it felt like to desire for his soul... for his life... to be restored...

The psalmist knew what it felt like to feel so alone... so far from God’s presence.

... to be overwhelmed by fear... to long for peace...

In this psalm, we see the psalmist uses poetic language to compare his emotions to that of a sheep... Some of us may be more familiar with sheep than others... So, let’s learn together...

“We are told “left to themselves, sheep lack everything...”

One writer explains, “[Sheep] refuse to lie down unless they are free of all fear...”

It seems hard to imagine what living free of fear feels like...

If the sheep falls over and gets stuck struggling to get onto its feet, it may feel panic— often only making things worse... “The only one who can restore the sheep to health is the shepherd...”

Not only that but sheep easily wander away... even if they had the best space to eat, they wander to where it is barren... “No other class of livestock requires more careful handling than do sheep...”

“In the summer... valleys are places of rich pasture and much water, but they are also places of danger... Since the sun does not shine in the valley very well, there really are shadows which at any moment may become shadows of death— the problem is fear in the valley...”²

As the psalmist compared his spiritual and emotional experience to being like a sheep, I wonder if he prayed—

“God, I need you... I’m desperate for you... without you, I lack... everything... anything good... In fact, even when I go to rest... my fears and anxieties overwhelm me to the point of hardly ever feeling truly rested... What would it even feel like to feel free of all my fears??... This is hard to imagine... And, what about my relationships with my family

¹ Muller, Wayne. *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest and Delight*. Sounds True, 1999.

² Boice, James M. *An Expositional Commentary: Psalms 1-41*. Vol. 1, Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1994.

and friends... even the world around me—God, you know where my pain lies in my life... sometimes my anxieties wake me up at night... I long to have relationships healed in my life... I often feel so alone... I long for healing in the depths of my being...”

This prayer is a description of the sheep’s need of the shepherd...

David used this image to describe himself and his need for God. How many of us want to admit to the depths of our own need?

How many of us want to name how weak we often feel? Or to expose our own fear--- even fears of failure...?

Maybe it’s not too hard to wonder how that feels after all...

Trouble in the world

At times, our own feelings of helplessness... our own need for peace just like the psalmist described his own... seems closer to us than perhaps we might like to admit...

Here are just a few pictures of what our world has experienced in the past month...

(***Pictures from the month of September on screen...)

We are continually being told about hurricanes, fires, earthquakes, acts of hatred and violence, talk of nuclear bombings... Our world is continually being traumatized... just simply by living in it... Fear and anxiety often seem rampant...

Perhaps, we may feel as if we don’t even want to turn on the TV... We may think, “I don’t want to hear one more sad thing...” or “I can’t take anymore...”

Those are valid feelings...

The sadness and chaos of everyday life can feel overwhelming. Sometimes, it may feel easier to just not want to even interact with anyone anymore... If I’m not vulnerable or share myself with another person, I won’t get hurt...

But, if it truly is our desire to have our hearts break for what breaks God’s heart... it makes sense that these events make us feel sad...

Pain and suffering of God’s beloved people breaks God’s heart...

It is also a privilege to have the option to not be concerned about the things that affect another life perhaps in another part of the world... or our neighbor.

Empathy goes a long way if we consider, “What if I lost someone I love in the hurricane?”

“What if my house was demolished?” ... “How do I get my life back?... even some taste of security and normalcy...”

While we were watching Hurricane Irma come closer and closer to Florida... you could feel the palpable anxiety growing...

I remember talking with my fiancé's son, who is seven and has autism about the hurricane...

As we talked about what a hurricane is and what it means for the people who live in Florida, he asked me, "How can we stop it??" actively wanting to stop the danger...

Currently, his mind as he thinks quite literally and understands the Lego Movie as part of real life... he responded, "We need to get Batman!?" and also talked about all the ways to karate chop the hurricane...

He did not know yet that there is no stopping the hurricane...

Helplessness... fear... anxiousness... these feelings aren't so far away...

Recently, I was working with a woman who was near death... she fluctuated between a sense of calm and anxiety. She did not like to be alone... and I am not sure if any of us would want to be alone if we were close to dying? Not only that... but also her hands would often be seen shaking or grasping her blanket almost uncontrollably.

At times, she would recall some of her favorite memories—especially of when she was comforted at church.

And other moments, she would say to me, "You live a hard life... and then you die..." and "I'm just sitting here... waiting to die..." Her fears and anxieties were erupting...

I wonder if any of the people simply waiting for the hurricanes to hit had similar thoughts?

I wonder what those words bring up inside of us?

We do not need to be on the brink of death to feel distant from God...

Grace in the text

When the sheep felt distant from the shepherd, they were overwhelmed with fear...

The only thing that calmed them was the shepherd's close presence...

The Shepherd is the only one who could protect the sheep and calm their anxieties...³

"A good shepherd is personally concerned with the welfare of his sheep... "Green pastures" [were a] place of satisfaction... The combination of "green pastures" and "quiet waters" portrays God's refreshing care for his own...

God renews them so that they feel life in the presence of God is good and worthy living..."

God restores the enjoyment of life to his own."

This psalm emphasizes that God will guide during times of utmost distress. "The psalmist imagines the path leading through the darkest valley..."

"God is still present... The shepherd who guides is always with the sheep..."⁴

"...The psalmist expresses confidence in God not during a moment of tranquility, but rather when being pressed by enemies..."

The psalmist finds confidence during his trouble, namely in the intimate presence of God.

He does not fear evil because you are with me... a promise God makes in his covenant relationship with Israel... reaffirming God's comfort in the midst of trouble. The rod and staff are implements that the shepherd uses to fend off predators and to goad the sheep in the right direction and towards provision."⁵

God is bound by God's name "Yahweh" to be present with his people.

Underlying... "Yahweh" is the promise, "I will be with you" (Ex. 3:12) ...

"...God keeps all the promises to his covenantal children. He is loyal to his people..."

"The psalmist rejoices that Yahweh is like a shepherd in his provision, guidance, and protection, so that the psalmist lacks nothing and fears not..."

³ Boice, James M. *An Expositional Commentary: Psalms 1-41*. Vol. 1, Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1994.

⁴ Longman III, Tremper, and David Garland. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms*. Revised ed., vol. 5, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2008.

⁵ Longman III, Tremper. *Tyndale Old Testament Commentary: Psalms*. Inter-Varsity Press, 2014.

One of my favorite parts of his psalm is when the psalm speaks, “Surely your goodness and love will follow me...” This gives us a picture of God’s goodness and love not simply just following us but rather pursuing us!

“The “love” of God is the covenantal commitment to bless his people with his goodness... The psalmist expresses deep confidence in God’s loyalty. Instead of being pursued by enemies who seek his destruction, it is God’s “goodness and love” that follow him...

God’s loving care follows the psalmist throughout life...” The “psalmist’s experience of God’s “goodness and love” is equivalent to dwelling “in the house of the Lord.” “It is not the place but the vitality of the relationship which transforms...”⁶

“The house of the Lord... was where God made his presence known among his people... Reading Psalm 23 in light of the New Testament indicates that it is true that the psalmist and others who put their trust in God will live in his presence forever.”⁷

Grace in the world

The woman I shared with you about who was feeling anxious as she was nearing death and her hands often seen shaking... She, too, like the psalmist felt comfort in through the gift of presence. Her fears were eased when someone, especially a loved one was near her...

When I met with her, we would hold hands...

As soon as we were holding hands... her hands were stilled... it was as if her whole being could be soothed... even amid her pain.

Even during the pain, we see happening each day in our world... God meets us in prayer... God works through individuals and organizations to help empower healing after hurricanes and fires... and heart ache... Wherever we see a taste of goodness and love... We can see and experience God’s presence.

God frees us from our fears.

“Praying the psalm helps us to express trust in God and to experience calm during life’s troubles, including imminent death.”

“...Jesus himself announced to his disciples, ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep’ (john 10;11).

⁶Longman III, Tremper, and David GarLand. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms*. Revised ed., vol. 5, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2008.

⁷ Longman III, Tremper. *Tyndale Old Testament Commentary: Psalms*. Inter-Varsity Press, 2014.

Indeed, Jesus... is the ultimate comfort in life and in death, and just like a shepherd, Jesus comforts us, his people by revealing, "I know my sheep and my sheep know me".⁸

The following is a prayer focused on praying for our world adapted from Psalm 23--

****Praying for Others-- Psalm 23 (adapted from New Life Translation)—with congregation or volunteer reading bold print**

- **You are our shepherd. We have all that we need**
We pray for those who feel overwhelmed and alone in the darkness of depression, illness, loss or anxiety
- **You let us rest in green meadows**
We pray for refugees and asylum seekers who have given up everything, for survivors of natural disasters who have nothing left, and for all who are homeless
- **You lead us beside peaceful streams**
We pray for people who have only dirty water to drink, and those for whom hunger is not a choice
- **You renew our strength. You guide us along right paths, bringing honour to his name**
We pray for those whose faith is new or fragile, for those burdened by doubts
- **Even when we walk through the darkest valley, we will not be afraid, for you are close beside us**
We pray for those who struggle with temptation or addiction, for those who feel invisible or voiceless
- **You prepare a feast for us in the presence of our enemies**
We pray for Christians who live in countries where it is dangerous or illegal be a Christian. For those who face persecution, imprisonment, and death, as a direct consequence of their faith
- **Our cup overflows with blessings**
We pray for people who have hurt us, for people we find it hard to forgive, for people we find it difficult to love
- **Surely, your goodness and unfailing love will pursue us all the days of our lives, and we will live in your house for ever**
We pray that the time will not be far off when your Kingdom will come, and the earth will be filled with the knowledge of your glory.
Amen.”⁹

⁸ Longman III, Tremper. *Tyndale Old Testament Commentary: Psalms*. Inter-Varsity Press, 2014.

⁹ http://www.st-cuthberts.net/cr_p23_prayers.php#valley

God gives to us the peace that only God can give.... as the Holy Spirit empowers us to trust that no matter what happens in our lives, we are held in the cusp of God's hand... there is no greater foundation...

No matter what our anxieties we face, our hope is found in God... God offers his gentle presence to us as we learn to gentle ourselves...

God pours out the shalom... the PEACE which we long for into our innermost parts of ourselves... God restores our souls...

Christ has already paid our penalty so that we don't have to remain living in fear no matter what anxieties come...

When God looks at us, because we are his covenant people, God sees his beloved...

"I Surrender All"—

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWkgJnm3xIM>

Song suggestions:

"I need Thee" by Selah <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-LkUTjYSUs>

"Come Thou Fount"—

"Precious Lord Take My Hand / Just A Closer Walk With Thee – Selah" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsOtd8NfQpo>

"Oceans"

"Hosanna"

The Name of Pain: Psalm 42

Good morning. I would like to share with you all about some of my experiences from my third internship of four working towards chaplaincy. I spent much of my time in a Level 1 trauma hospital downtown Denver. It was located in the highest crime rate area in Denver. Interacting with victims of stabbings, shootings, and violence was part of the everyday life. This hospital was known for giving the same level of care to everyone they served—whether it was the governor or a person who was living on the streets.

My internship in chaplaincy was focused on meeting with patients and attending to their spiritual needs. This could take on various forms but it could look like saying a prayer or being present with a patient or their family. Today, I'm going to share with you about two visits from my internship that have stuck with me and been near to my heart.

One woman in particular, I'll call her Evonne, I was able to meet with throughout my entire internship. Evonne came into the hospital with a blockage in her gut. She had numerous health problems. While at the hospital, Evonne also found out that she had cancer and had only weeks to live.

Not only was Evonne adapting to the fact that she had weeks to live but also within the last year she had lost a son and a grandson. Her grief had greatly affected her physical health as it rapidly declined.

During this visit, I suggested to her that we read Psalm 42. It says:

¹As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.

²My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?

³My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”

⁴These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the house of God
under the protection of the Mighty One^[d]
with shouts of joy and praise
among the festive throng.

⁵Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.

⁶My soul is downcast within me;
therefore I will remember you
from the land of the Jordan,
the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar.

⁷Deep calls to deep
in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
have swept over me.

⁸ By day the LORD directs his love,
at night his song is with me—
a prayer to the God of my life.

⁹ I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?”

¹⁰ My bones suffer mortal agony
as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”

¹¹ Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.”

After reading Psalm 42, Evonne asked me to read it again... When we finished reading it for the second time, she looked at me with such an expression of finally being understood... she stated, “THIS... is how I feel!”

Evonne’s pain was named.

She related to the psalmist’s emotions of feeling forgotten... mourning... her bones suffering mortal agony... feeling taunted by her enemies... Her soul felt distraught...

She continued to share, “I NEVER expected to go through all of this in my life... I never thought I’d be like this with all these tubes hooked up to me and in this condition.”

I wonder if the psalmist related to Evonne in her questions and emotions...

Psalm 42 was the expression of the psalmist’s yearning for God.

He lamented his deep depression.

The psalmist was in a foreign land. His enemies taunted him as they asked, “Where’s your God now?!? Has he abandoned you?” The psalmist was heavily weighed down and deeply disturbed by his enemies’ success.

Evonne also felt weighed down by her enemies. Cancer, pain, loss, familial and internal conflict were the names of just a few of the enemies that weighed Evonne down.

Throughout this psalm we see the psalmist giving us numerous images of the depths of his pain... He lamented the fact that his enemies had stormed over him. Trouble came over him like waves crashing down on him one on top of another...

The word the psalmist used most often to describe and name his pain was “Downcast.” Throughout the psalm we see him mourning saying, “Why are you DOWNCAST oh my soul?” He was in a state of anxiety and distress.

The psalmist had been overwhelmed... as if by a flood...

He poured out his soul to God. He named his pain as he cried out, “God, where are you?!... I feel abandoned by you.” As the psalmist hears the sound of the rushing water, he imagines himself *engulfed* in the current... He compared this experience to his emotional distress.

The feeling of being forgotten or abandoned is all too familiar.

One of the hospital units I was assigned to this summer was the hospital jail.

On one of my last days of my internship, there was a man who was a different kind of visit for me. I’m often touched by each of my visits in some way... but this one was different.

I left this man feeling like I wanted to weep...

I’ll call this man George. One of the nurses recommended that I go meet with George. She told me he was in his last stages dying of cancer.

When I entered his room, it looked like many other hospital jail cells. It was in the basement of the hospital and had cold, white walls with simply a bed, a toilet, and a tray stand for food.

George looked so tender and fragile. His legs looked to be about the same size as my arms... he was mostly skin and bone.

I found out that some nights George is kept awake violently vomiting.

The cancer was overtaking George's body. Not only did George appear to be broken physically but also emotionally.

I introduced myself to George and let him know that I wanted to meet with him. He looked shocked that I would even want to meet with him. He stated and appeared genuinely thankful that I was willing to visit him and to even think of him.

George quickly began telling me some of his story and stated, "My family has abandoned me...."

He continued, "I haven't had contact with them in ten years."

Tears freely flowed down his face...

He wiped at his face... he looked at his tears on his hands almost as if he was unaware of what the tears were that fell down his cheeks...

This man expressed to me that he recites the Lord's Prayer every night. It seemed to be the only hope that this man had left to hold onto in his last days of life. He asked me if I could pray for reconciliation with his family.

Often in my visits, people ask me for prayer and I'm the one who usually speaks the prayer. But, as tears continued to stream down George's face, he broke out reciting the Lord's Prayer...

I held back my own tears in order to brokenly join George in speaking the words of this prayer.

He then went onto pray for a softening of his family's hearts and, if it was needed, of his heart too...

He said: "God my heart is in anguish...

My family has abandoned me...

I feel so alone...

I'm waiting here to die..."

George's soul was distraught... downcast... in every way George and his situation appeared hopeless...

I wonder how many of us have felt abandoned or overwhelmed by our pain?

How many of us have felt downcast... hopeless...

Maybe even to the point that the pain just hurts too much... that words can't even begin to fully express the pain we feel.

Psalms 42 creates space to name our pain... to name any emotion we are experiencing... Because of God's divine mercy, the psalmist was not afraid to name the condition of his heart... to name the fact that his soul was downcast.

We see the metaphor used of God as our rock. This does NOT represent God as a rocky, relatively **inaccessible** summit... distant from us and our pain. But, rather! We see God as the psalmist's ROCK!!! A place where the psalmist can find protection from his enemies.¹

¹ Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006).

By God's grace, even in a distant land and in the midst of exhaustion, the psalmist turned to God. He knew that he could find no comfort in himself. He knew that his soul was only satisfied in God...

The psalmist was specific in his prayer as he desired God even while being in a place of depression and exhaustion. He trusted that God would not be overwhelmed by his pain.

In the psalmist's prayer, he asked God why he had to continue suffering physically, spiritually, and emotionally under oppression. He reminded God, "My enemies taunt my faith continually!" Through the Holy Spirit's prompting, the psalmist was able confidently call upon God to deliver him.

The Heidelberg Catechism Q & A 116 states the following:

Q. Why do Christians need to pray?

A. Because prayer is the most important part of the thankfulness God requires of us.¹

And also because God gives his grace and Holy Spirit only to those who pray continually and groan inwardly,

asking God for these gifts

and thanking God for them.²

The psalmist named his pain. As he prayed continually and groaned inwardly, he knew God was trustworthy and able to handle whatever he brought to him.

He had HOPE knowing God's love and God's song would be WITH him continually... by day and by night.

The hope of God was present where no hope should be found. The psalmist was able to be confident in naming his pain and trusting that God was with him. He was satisfied in God...

We also can be confident that God is with us. By God's grace, whoever we are, wherever we have been, God is with us as we name our pain. He alone can fully satisfy us. God holds onto us when we no longer feel like we can hold onto him. HE IS **OUR ROCK**... our safe place... our refuge...

My heart ached for George in the hospital jail. He touched my heart with his raw desire for healing with his family. No matter what this man's crime was for

² <http://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/heidelberg-catechism>

bringing him to jail, this was a dying man, an image bearer of God in pain and desperate for hope. He felt abandoned...

George named his pain.

But, through God's grace... God met George in his pain. It's not always obvious how God reveals himself to us. But, God does...

Maybe God's love is shown through a touch on the hand or maybe even simply sitting and praying the Lord's Prayer together...

I visit with people to be the presence of God to them... to be with them in their pain. My hope and prayer is that at all times, especially when people feel as if God has abandoned them or is punishing them that they will feel as if they are met right where they are in their lives.

This summer I struggled with depression. I saw a taste of what can happen when we deny the depth of our pain.

I also was reminded that God speaks gently to us... inviting us to himself... knowing that God alone can fully satisfy us... God's presence with us creates space for us to be in our pain... just like the psalmist, we are not without hope.

Through the Holy Spirit's presence and intervention, we can name our pains...

We can know that no pain is too big that God does not have the resources to deal with it. And no pain that we have that is so small for that it would be a bother or burden to God.

God can handle our pain whatever name it has.

Our emotions aren't too much for God. No matter what waves of pain feel like they are crashing down on us, we can present our prayers specifically to God.

We can tell God *exactly* what is going on...

Not that God can't decipher the general, but we untangle the angst within us when we name it and say it and tell it to God.

We can go to God confidently knowing that God is ready to hear our nitty and gritty.

The hope of God is present where no hope should be found.

We can have hope because God is with us. We are satisfied in God...

The Lord's Prayer represented hope to George that he was not alone even though he was abandoned by his family. It revealed to him that God was with him... holding him in his pain.

For our closing, please join me in saying the Lord's Prayer...

Living in the Gray

The Weak and the Strong (Romans 14: 1-4)

14 *Accept* the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. ² One person's faith allows them to **eat** anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³ The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not *judge* the one who does, for God has **accepted** them. ⁴ Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will **stand**, for the Lord is able to make them **stand**.

(Goal: By God's grace, we are to live with a mutual love and respect for others; through the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to combat shame with acceptance.)

"YOU... are the reason we are losing members in OUR church!!!

An angry church member pointed a finger at a new member who just joined that Sunday.

He had volunteered to use his gifts in the worship service through playing the drums to glorify God. Some people in the church appreciated his gifts; others did not. This angry member in particular was furious that she could not worship with the loud beats of the drums.

Because of this church member's action, even though many attempted to care for this new member through phone calls and visits, the damage was done.

The new member never returned to that church.

He was shamed.

Shame... is the feeling not that I have done wrong. But, that I am wrong...

Shame is not only a problem in the church today but it was a problem Paul addressed in the early church...

From a distance the “strong” believer could see a “weak” believer socializing with some of his old friends in the market place. At first, the “weak” believer appeared calm and collected knowing exactly what he was about to order. But, then you could see the questions play across his face... the look of hesitation creeping into his eyes.

His doubts were triggered when he smelled the freshly hung meat; he wasn’t sure what to do... He felt a tremor of panic as he found himself pressured to make a decision. He wondered, “Can I eat this meat??... How can I know for sure if this meat is clean or not? What if I come across naïve or even judgmental to those around me?...” In the still of the frozen moment, he could feel the stickiness of his sweaty palms in the midst of his anxiety... Out of habit, he paid for the vegetables.

The “strong” believer continued to observe the “weak” believers struggle... but yet did nothing to help him. Instead, with his head held high, he arrogantly approached the “weak” believer saying, “What’s your problem? Just vegetables for you again? Don’t you know any better? It doesn’t matter what meat you

chose... The meat won't hurt you!" ...Shamed, the "weak", now face flushed red believer turned and hastily walked away...

The core issue with which Paul dealt was not only a dietary one but rather how believers treated one another. People were not being welcomed, loved, and accepted as they are... but rather shamed causing them to withdraw from fellowship with one another.

There were disagreements among the believers not involving sin but rather were issues having more to do with personal convictions. And, instead of the "strong" in faith coming along side, caring for, and being in a growing relationship with those "weak" in faith, they were looking down on and judging those "weak" in faith.

To clarify, the 'weak' were referred to those who were young in the faith, those whose consciences were tender... who were still prone to make the link between the idol and the meat sacrificed to the idol. The "strong" were identified as those who were clearly convinced that idols (and the gods they represent) had no real existence. For them, the meat offered to these gods in sacrifice was neutral. No one be defiled by it.¹

¹ Kaiser, Jr., Walter C., Peter H. Davids, F.F. Bruce, and Manfred T. Braunch. *Hard Saying of the Bible*. Vol. 1. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1992. 576-78. 1 vols. Print.

Paul expressed that both the strong and the weak were to be faulted for their attitudes toward each other.

Both are forms of acting like a supervisor over people you weren't given any authority over. But, he nonetheless surfaces a special concern for the weak ones.

Instead of accepting each other, they were tearing each other down...

Today, we still tear each other down. There are still spaces where we don't feel welcomed, loved, and accepted as we are...

Candace, a friend of mine, knows this feeling all too well. Throughout her life she had gone to church, but often she felt like she did not belong.

One night she attended a bible study focused on following God in spite of others telling us not to. This reminded Candace of her sister who is a nurse on Sabbatical. She is working with the woman and children in Mali on pre and post-natal care. Candace decided to take a chance and share this with the group.

As she was telling the group, she included that others thought her sister probably shouldn't go to Mali due to it being the country next to Liberia, which was one of the main countries suffering under Ebola. And even though, Candace's

sister suffers from chronic Lyme's disease... she still felt God's leading in going to Mali.

When Candace finished sharing her sister's experience, the room fell so silent you could hear a pin drop...

The leader attempting to break the now seemingly awkward silence as she dismissingly said to Candace, "Well if you look at it, if your sister dies, at least she'll be in a better place!"...

Candace once again felt the warm wash of shame flood over her as she felt once again rejected... and unheard... making her feel like she did not belong... after that she definitely didn't want to share anything else...

One shame researcher reports, "Shame leaves us feeling disconnected... feeling unworthy of connection with others..."

Shame... is the feeling not that I have done wrong. But, that I am wrong...

We are left feeling not talented enough, not pretty enough, not smart enough, not powerful enough, not good enough...

Under shame is the feeling... "I AM NOT... ENOUGH."

Whether someone is "weaker" or "stronger" in faith, we can see people being mistreated... We can see shame ripping people from the church. This is tragic.

The Bible contains many clear commands. But, it also silent or ambiguous about many moral issues—these “gray” areas have always been a source of dispute and conflict among Christians.

Whenever we lack in love and acceptance for one another... the vital dimension of growth in Christ as a way of life is set aside.

By our own strength, we cannot love or accept others as we are called to...

Paul battled shame by calling the believers to accept one another—to welcome, as with open hearts and arms, eager and ready to share all of life. This is the kind of love we owe one another in Christ.

Paul came down hard on both the strong and weak believers because God had already accepted both. Paul gave clear, simple guidance for the way to the righteous, loving community that God seeks to shape.

Each of these principles is undergirded by the most central principle: “Love does no harm to the neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:10).²

² Kaiser, Jr., Walter C., Peter H. Davids, F.F. Bruce, and Manfred T. Braunch. *Hard Saying of the Bible*. Vol. 1. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1992. 576-78. 1 vols. Print.

God accepted the spiritually weak and the spiritually strong as his dear children. Only because of God's love... are the weak and strong able to love and accept each other.

Even when the early church struggled to live in harmony with each other, God reminded them, "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34–35). God's plan for believers includes the demonstration of His righteousness in and through a loving community.

Paul lays out the principle of love—do not despise or judge one another. If God has received someone, don't try to get more exclusive than God (v. 3).

The weak and the strong in faith were affirmed to live by their own convictions... and yet to be careful not to flaunt them.

Through Christ's example, the early believers even with varied backgrounds--- both rich and poor, Judean and foreign Jew, found a unity and love that observers could hardly believe.

God's love also empowers us to love and accept one another...

But, the seeds of shame cannot be easily uprooted.

The story I shared with you earlier isn't done yet. Along with many other stories of pain and shame within the church and in our lives... Many of us are unsure how our stories will turn out...

Recently, a man told me about his daughter who had left the Christian faith for more another religion. His daughter had lost her mother suddenly at a young age and in her grief and loss, she never truly felt accepted or that she belonged in the Christian community.

Her father stated that when she comes home he and she will go back and forth respectfully with their different beliefs. But, when it comes down to it... he always says to her, "Despite our differences... in this Christian family... you will always have a place to come home to... a place where you are loved... you will always have a place to BELONG..."

Belonging combats shame where it spreads like fire... where people are mistreated. The Holy Spirit utilizes belonging to quiet the voices that tell us that we are not smart enough, that we are not good enough, that we not enough...

God's grace allows us to be vulnerable... to be deeply seen.... The Holy Spirit's work in our lives empowers us to know but also believe that WE ARE ENOUGH.

God DOES NOT shame us.... rather God reminds us that we belong to him.

WE ARE HIS.

Just as God accepted the spiritually weak and the spiritually strong in the early church, God's acceptance of us empowers us to understand that we are known... and loved as we are.

We can be like God in the sense of treating people the way God treats people. This starts with love not judgment.

God allows us to manage conflict and experience life changing forgiveness as we look at each other through God's eyes recognizing that we are each human. We are all image bearers of Christ.

Whatever the disagreement, it is not more important than our brother or sister in Christ.

God's love and grace allows us to, "Accept one another... just as Christ accepts [each one of us]... (15:7).

Our only comfort in life and in death truly is... that we are not our own but belong... body and soul... in life and in death... to our faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.