

**Do You Want to Get Well**  
**By Justin Hatchett**  
**John 5:1-9**

Sometime later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

“Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. Did you know the church is supposed to be a hospital for the broken, not a club for the saints? When you hear the question “Do you want to get well?” Who came to mind? Perhaps there is a friend, family member, or acquaintance who seems to be stuck in a pattern of dysfunction. Maybe in an addiction or an abusive relationship or maybe someone struggling with control, anger, fear, anxiety, or depression. When you heard the question, a show of hands, in full transparency, how many of you DID NOT think about yourselves? You said “Not me, I’m good, it’s those other people that need healing”, right?

Having served in the recovery ministry and a discipleship role here at Gateway, I have witnessed those who wanted to get well. They had found themselves having hit rock bottom. The pain was too great, there was no other choice, but to drop to their knees and cry out for help. They had reached the end of their rope, which is the address of Jesus Christ. These are individuals who were fully invested in answering yes to the question, “Do you want to get well?” Some of them are sitting in this room. One of them is standing on this stage. Unfortunately, I have also seen others who knew they were not well, knew the path to healing, and simply chose not to take it. At that time, in that season of their life, they were not ready to dig through the pain of the past. Look, let's be honest, a lot of times I can hardly blame them because digging in can be very uncomfortable. But comfort is not synonymous with growth.

Many of us are comfortable in our dysfunction. When life becomes unmanageable that root of fear sets in and triggers us to react. We attempt to control our environment and when we don't find control we get angry and lash out. Because anger is powerful and it feels good. It's our preferred state. It's familiar and it's comfortable because it's ours. After years of stuffing our feelings and having unmet expectations turn to bitterness, that which at one time was painful, has now become comfortable and familiar. The anxiety and the fear that at one time you wanted God to take has now become your preferred state. The patterns of dysfunction have become commonplace.

You see, my walk of faith did not start at a young age. I wasn't baptized as a child to accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior, to then ride off into the sunset to live happily ever after. My walk of faith was the way of pain. But the pain will drive you like a nail to the cross. I found myself reeling as my marriage was crumbling. We were two broken kids in a broken marriage. My inability to be an emotionally available mate made a poor excuse for a husband. She had relapsed into alcoholism after 6 long years of sobriety, a sobriety, that I was convinced was

etched in stone. All the while in the back of both of our minds, “are the kids old enough to remember and be affected by our fights?” Fights that were becoming all the more frequent. I wanted to run, but I couldn’t. After all, if I leave and she is in relapse, where does that leave the kids? If I say I have had enough, and that I want her to leave, what happens if she hurts herself? How do I explain to my kids that I gave up when I should have been trying to protect her, even from herself? So I had to stand in it, I had to stand in the pain. Teetering between fear and rage. Choking on anxiety and anger. The big strong man on the floor in the closet, in the fetal position, bawling like I never had before. But, Jesus.....

That is when my walk of faith started. I had nothing left to lose, and everything to gain. I wasn't healed by the wave of a magic wand. I didn't open my eyes and all of the sudden everything was right with the world. I was just able to get off the floor and try again. I didn't want to be in that place anymore, I wanted to get well. Day by day, step by step. A little less of who I was and a little more of who I was becoming.

(I Repeat) Jesus saw him lying there and learned he had been in this condition for a long time... Self-awareness,” to get there it took a few things”

Do you know what your condition is? How long has it been your condition? Do you have enough awareness to answer the question honestly? In this passage it says “Jesus learned of his condition”, but somehow, I get the feeling that Jesus knew of his condition all along. More importantly, Jesus knows our condition and probably knows it better than we do. The question is,” Will we invite Him in?” Jesus is not in the business of strong-arming you and kicking down the door of your situation. Forcing himself into your space to save the day. He wants you to invite Him into your “condition”. He is not yelling and screaming. He is asking in a very calm voice,” Do you want to get well?”

Proverbs 21:2 says “A person may think their own ways are right, but the Lord weighs the heart” (Only God can judge and know the heart)

Are we qualified to answer such a question? As human beings, we are fallible, selfish, and self-centered creatures. Often, we contemplate where we learned the behaviors that plague our species and come to terms with the fact that many of them come naturally. My walk of faith has taught me that “sin” does indeed exist in us all, and we would have absolutely no reason to even acknowledge it if it were not for the teachings of scripture. Without scripture we would be moving through this world making our own rules, moving under our own strength, destined for, and deserving of spiritual death.

Psalm 139 23-24

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

Now we should change the question to: “Are you ready to get well?” How do we examine ourselves? How do we cultivate self-awareness? Just like with everything else in the body of the church, it starts with prayer. I had this scripture hanging on the mirror in my bathroom for a long time. I read it every morning to understand my shortcomings as a man, as a husband, and as a father. Heavenly Father search me, show me. These were the moments when I would ask myself questions that I had never even thought to ask. Why can't you see her as a daughter of the heavenly father? Why can't you love her like Jesus says to love her? Why can't you walk side by side, hand in

hand, instead of constantly being at odds and butting heads? The truth is, I knew the answer to the question. After years of stuffing our feelings and letting unmet expectations turn into resentments. Then letting resentments turn to bitterness. The bitterness took root in our hearts, and our hearts had turned to stone. Our hearts turned hard towards each other. But Jesus....

The type of change that took place in my heart, was the type of change only Jesus can do. Love her, even when you're angry. Love her, when you want to call it quits. Love her, when she doesn't love you back. Love her when you feel she doesn't deserve it. Love her, when she doesn't love herself. How?

Matthew 16:24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Am I following Jesus? Then I need to put my pride aside. Am I following Jesus? Then it's time to die to self. Am I following Jesus? Then I must stand in the pain and weather the suffering. How many of you prefer to sit in the pain? Not the "I broke my leg and I need a doctor" type of pain. But emotional pain. Broken hearted pain. Grief, sorrow, loss, betrayal. There are entire industries built around the idea of denying these feelings and the world would have you believing that therein lies the solution.

Romans 5:3-5 the apostle Paul writes. "Not only so, but we glory in our sufferings because we know suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

I don't want to sit here and portray the idea that I'm some sort of spiritual superhero, because I did a thing. God did that. The fact of the matter is, I would have never made it this far without help. Earlier I mentioned via the reading of Psalm 139 that we go to God through prayer to search us, to know us, to test us, and to see us. It's our first step in self-awareness. But I also had to go to my brothers in Christ. My sponsor in recovery Shane. My good friend Sam Woodberry. My brother Albie Zayas, who I affectionately refer to as Albie from the Bronx, is one of my spiritual mentors. He and his wife Sylvia opened up their home to the wife and I on many occasions. Jesse and Chrissy Sampson, our pastors, showed up at our house and sat with us in our living room. Ready and willing, to get down in the mess with us. Because no matter how messy it gets, Jesse said, and I quote, "it washes off." Not only would these folks show up when times were hardest, but they would be the ones to hold us accountable. They would be the ones who would tell us the hard truths, the things we didn't want to hear. Not out of spite, but out of love.

Ephesians 4:15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

Speaking in the truth of God will allow us to know the truth about ourselves. The good and the bad. We must have the knowledge of God to understand His truth about us. Because we cannot believe what we don't know. Speaking truth in love will allow us to see the truth about ourselves and relay it to each other without shame and condemnation. Truth will allow us to believe what God has said about us as well as show us the areas we need to grow. But it is difficult to hear the truth if we do not have trust.

God blessed us by working through people for our good. Relationships are based on mutual trust and transparency for the sake of spiritual growth. But trust is the prerequisite, and trust can be scary. Many of us have been hurt by people we trusted. The pain of that hurt lingered for so long that we swore a resolve to never find ourselves in that situation again. We retreated inside, we locked the door, and we have no intention of opening it again. For those of us that have been burned, to find trust like this again, will require courage. Courage to willingly open ourselves up to potential sorrow and pain.

Courage, as best I can tell, comes from God. The type of courage that says not only have you experienced the pain and hurt in the dark times of your life, but that you may have to do so again. With the full understanding that one day it will be worth it. Your courage in the fire will become a testimony for others as they walk through hard times. The knowledge of victory in Christ will be multiplied from you to others, for generations.

Let us circle back to where we started and contemplate the verse in John 5.

A man lays on a mat for 38 years and the salvation he thinks he so desperately wants, he can see, but he just can't touch. It's just out of reach. Until the continual disappointment slowly chips away at his resolve and what he used to desperately want, now he starts to resent. Resentment turns to bitterness; bitterness turns to hatred. The man not only starts to hate his situation, he begins to hate himself. Never realizing that true salvation was his for the taking all along. Will you take it?

## **Stress Free Stewardship**

### **by Kelley Hobbs**

About 15 years ago, I had something really go wrong with my Volkswagen Passat. I took it into the shop and they were confused by it. They had to call the corporate office of VW to try to find out what was going on. They determined that they thought the heads were warped to the tune of about \$6000. The car wasn't worth that much, so my wife Ginger and I immediately began to think about the fact that we were going to have to buy another car, which was really stressing me out. There was additional pressure because we had about \$6000 in my tithe account that we hadn't given away yet because we hadn't felt a calling as to where to send it. It occurred to me at that moment that we better give that money away now or we were going to be tempted to use it on a car. So I did it right away. Within a day or two, I went to the dealer to pick up my car because I wasn't going to pay that amount to fix it. I gassed it up and went home. It was still drivable, but it put out a lot of white smoke. The next morning, I drove it to work, and my car worked perfectly with no smoke or hesitation of any type. It felt like a miracle to me. The message the Lord impressed on me was, "This \$6000 is mine and I'm going to get it either way." Now, I am not suggesting this is a doctrine in any way, but that's the impression the Lord left on my heart. And more importantly, that's the lesson that's stuck with me for all these years later.

I believe God wants our finances to be a stress-free experience, which is a modern way of saying what God has always taught us. For example, in 2 Corinthians 9:8: "And God can bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." I don't want you to just hear me, but it is my hope that you will integrate this into your life so you can be free to serve the Lord in whatever way he has called you. So many Christians get completely sidelined through poor financial management and stewardship using the world's systems of handling money. What we will talk about today is counterintuitive, but it is the path to stress-free stewardship of the Lord's blessings. Let's kick the world's plan to the curb and live abundantly as the Lord intended us to do!

We need to address the spiritual oppression of finances which is Satan's # 1 tool over Americans. God does not want this for us. If/when we can break free from this, we are truly free to apply our gifts to the kingdom and live a joyful abundant life.

Americans are uniquely self-sufficient in their actions and beliefs which unfortunately means we are more likely to apply man's accounting system to our "kingdom construction".

### **We must Give first!**

First off, we must give first before spending on anything else. I believe God has given me insight into this for a couple of reasons. Giving is the spiritual gift with which God has blessed me. Throughout my adult life, giving has been not only easy for me but a blessing to me. But when I was younger, I was a notorious cheapskate. And I always wanted to add everything up to the nearest penny. They say your weaknesses come out of your strength. And that became a story in my life.

As I just mentioned, my whole premise is very counterintuitive. The verse that paints this picture so clearly is Malachi 3:10: "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there maybe food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it."

This is the only verse in the Bible where God asks us to test him. That makes this a very important verse. And if you're not bringing the whole tithe into the storehouse then you can't really wonder why you're not being blessed. The opposite of a blessing is in fact a curse. If we are not testing God in this we also should not be surprised that finances are a curse in our lives.

It's not just the Old Testament. In Luke 6: 38, Jesus also addresses this: "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." The common thread here is not what you receive. But it's what you give. That is the action that we can take. What God is telling us is that when we take the action we're supposed to take, He will take the action and reduce financial stress from our lives.

### **Americans need a changed mindset**

Let me ask you all a few questions. Answer this to yourself.

- Would you rather be rich or poor?
- Do your financial decisions reflect your answer to the question?
- What does the Bible have to say about this?

I would say the answer to the first question should be neither. For to be effective in service to the Kingdom, we need our finances to not be a dominant stress point in our life. Whether we are rich or poor is irrelevant.

Three great verses really highlight this:

Ecclesiastes 5:10 "Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income." This clearly covers whether we should want to be rich or not. Now some of us may become rich, but if we are living for the Lord, then He most likely has allowed this to give us great opportunities to bless others. Let's not miss that, but let's also not love wealth if we have it.

Luke 14:28 "For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?" This has to do with the 2nd question. Our decision-making process must not have a flawed goal. Be smart, plan your spending, and avoid the devil's pitfalls and schemes.

1 Timothy 6:17-18 "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share." This becomes our great test. What do we put our faith in? We can be smart about our finances without putting our faith in them. I certainly still battle this concept in my own life. However, our hope must be in God. Only with our faith and hope placed in the Almighty can we achieve a true stress-free financial life. There is no other option.

### **Make biblical decisions about debt and risk**

According to personal finance author Jared Dillion, the sources of all financial stress are debt and risk. For instance, there are plenty of people with no money who have no stress

because they don't have debt or risk. I would say all 4 of my sons fall into this category. They don't have much, but they also don't have debt or risk, so they don't have stress. The obvious verse related to debt is Proverbs 22:5: "The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is a slave to the lender". Focus on the 2nd half of this verse – debt truly is slavery. The opposite of slavery is freedom. How many of us felt like we could not change jobs or other circumstance because of debt? That is the definition of slavery. If we are in this type of bondage, we are not free to serve the Lord in the way he has called us.

I believe this is the top tool that Satan uses on Americans. How can we keep up with our peers if we don't have enough? Debt! But this flies in the face of contentment that God has called us to have. God has so much to say about this! Here are two of my favorite verses on this topic:

Hebrews 13:5: "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'" This verse is essentially the whole sermon wrapped in 1 sentence. Don't love money, and by proxy what money gives us. Be content with what God has for us. That is our part. His part is He will NEVER leave or forsake us. No amount of money is better than that. Paul also says in Philippians 4:11-12: "Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need." The secret is what we just read in Hebrews and all the things we have already talked about.

Regarding risk, what do I mean? Many of us in our investments or other money schemes don't really understand how to create a low-risk financial portfolio. Most of us have 401k plans that are 100% in the stock market. That is a high risk and therefore high stress set up. Proverbs 21:5 says, "The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty." This all-stock plan is the definition of haste. There are ways to create investments that have parts in many types of investments that by definition create lower volatility portfolios that remove the stress from our lives when market catastrophes happen. And they always do happen so we should not be surprised by that.

God is very clear about this. In Ecclesiastes 11:2, He says "Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight; you do not know what disaster may come upon the land." See me afterwards if you need help on how specifically to do this.

Remember how we started this talk: God wants us to have a stress-free financial life so that we can serve him fully in the way He has called us to do. While the process is simple, the execution can be very difficult, especially if your background has conditioned you to see finances from the world's perspective.

What can we do to jump on board for stress-free finances? Here are four practical suggestions.

1. Pray about it. God wants this for all of us. He knows exactly where you need help, what you should do, and how you should do it. Start here.
2. Make "giving first fruits" a lifestyle. As we take control of our finances each month, we should decide first what we are giving to God, then make the rest work. Remember he said to test us, so let's do it!

3. Take control of your finances! Be intentional. Giving first, then everything else. Set up every month before it starts then follow the plan. If your income is irregular, then use the current month's income amount to set up your spending for the next month.
4. Make the right decisions about the big things: car, house, and education. Don't sweat the small stuff so much, but make sure to get the big three right. This is counterintuitive to what the personal finance industry tells you, but getting the big stuff right is the key, and moving the small stuff out of the stress category is just as important.

I have a lot more to say about the practical parts of this, so when we convert this sermon into a series, we will dig into the 4 practical suggestions I just made in the follow-up sermons. God bless you all!

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Sources: The Bible and No Worries by Jared Dillion



## **Purpose in suffering** **By Dawn Pehl**

**John 16:33 I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.**

When I was 27 years old, my husband and I were happily married and raising our four-year-old son when he started having a hard time catching his breath. After several doctors insisted it was allergies and the prescribed medications did nothing, we got the news that turned our lives upside down, my husband was diagnosed with an incurable cancer and we were told that treatments would only add time for him. He was a young healthy non-smoker, exercised daily and had no cancer in his family history. HOW COULD THIS BE HAPPENING? HOW DO WE TELL OUR FOUR-YEAR-OLD SON HIS DAD WOULD BE DYING SOON? HOW WOULD WE HANDLE HIS SUFFERING AND EVENTUALLY HIS UNTIMELY DEATH?

Questions about suffering and loss such as these have perplexed our society for ages. How do we as Christians handle suffering and troubles. According to a Pew Research Center survey coming off the pandemic that killed 5 million people in 2021, “more than 70% of Americans say they rarely (26%) or never (48%) feel angry with God for allowing terrible things to happen to people. Additionally, about six-in-ten U.S. adults have thought about big questions related to suffering and why terrible things happen to people, especially in light of recent tragedies. However, most Americans attribute suffering to human actions rather than directly blaming God.” If the suffering in the world doesn’t make people doubt God’s existence, and we don’t blame him, then how do we reconcile suffering with our beliefs about God? I have been an accountant for thirty years, so I LOVE to reconcile, so let’s get started. I am going to break this down into four areas that will help us reconcile suffering with our beliefs in God.

*First, we have to understand, why do bad things happen to good people.*

Ecclesiastes 9:2-3 (NIV) says “All share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. As it is with the good, so with the sinful; as it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them.” My husband did not get cancer because he was bad or good. It did not happen to him because he was a sinner – because guess what, we are all sinners. I am sure some of you have gone through difficult trials and sufferings too. You were not targeted by God. Remember after Adam and Eve committed the first human sin against God, suffering was introduced and the world we live in became a broken world. We all share a common destiny; bad things happen in the fallen world. Some suffering is from our sinful nature or wrong choices we make, but some like my husband’s instance is due simply to our world being fallen. The hard part is to remember God did not leave us here to suffer pointlessly.

*Secondly, the bible is filled with suffering and death of good people.* Christian Author

David Jeremiah said “There are so many people in the Bible that faced bad things and preserved Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Jeremiah, Esther, Paul, Peter, or Jesus himself. Their experiences with troubles and trials can be summarized in the little verse that describes how Jesus responded to suffering: “Though He was a Son, he learned obedience from what he suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). Don’t miss it! “He learned....” If Jesus Christ our Savior, in the mysterious mix of His divinity and humanity, had to learn from suffering, what does that say about us?” It says that we too can also

learn from suffering just as those leaders in the Bible did. We can learn many lessons but I want to focus on humility. We learn through humility how fragile our earthly life is and remember that it is eternity with God in heaven that we should be focused on. We should be serving his purpose and not our own selfish purpose while on earth. By being humble, we place ourselves in a vulnerable state. This can draw attention from those people who do not believe in God. When my husband was sick, we had to humble ourselves to ask for help from others. My husband humbly said I am willing to continue to work even during treatment, sometimes that meant stopping on his long commute to work to pull over to get sick, get over his nausea, and get back on the road to get to work with a good attitude. Can you imagine the impact he had on others as he fought through and kept his faith in God during all that pain and discomfort? People still talk about that today, almost 18 years after his death. As a family, we focused on him and did not lose faith. Even our four-year-old son kept the faith that he understood, he recited the 23 Psalm from memory in front of the entire church during his dad's illness and again at his funeral. Our obedience to God must continue through the suffering, that is what we are called to do.

*Thirdly, is God's with us during our suffering?* Isaiah 41:13 "For I, the Lord your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, 'Fear not, I am the one who helps you.'" When Greg was diagnosed, we had only just moved to Georgetown a few months prior and had just started attending our new church we would eventually join and call home. God provided exactly the church family and people we needed. He provided a community of believers to pray and be there with us every step of the way, even though they just met us. During Greg's illness and even after his death, that NEW church community gave us the much-needed support our hearts needed. Our circle of young families had a Christian therapist in the group that held a special gathering for all the families and children to explain grief and death. She even explained that God could handle our anger and frustration. God provided this educated woman to this group; it was not a coincidence – she was able to explain some hard realities to these young children and families. God weaved our lives together and provided the resources we all needed. There were so many ways this church family helped us during this season. To this day even though many of us now attend different churches and most of our children are grown, we still get together a few times a year and keep in touch regularly praying for each other and supporting each other in many different ways. God was working and present the entire time through the hands and feet of our church family. What an amazing God we serve.

*Lastly, we need to rely on and trust in God:* Remember that these are outward circumstances, conflicts, suffering, and troubles, encountered by all believers. We need to spend time in prayer, be honest with God (even the hard feelings), believe in him, be humble, give him credit through thankfulness and faithfulness, and read the bible. We are told several times in the bible that blessed are those who persevere, blessed are those who prove their character of faith, and the more God's refinement is in us the more our hearts can love him. When I googled how many bible verses are in the bible to help us through suffering, I found over 100. The Bible is a great resource for us when we are suffering. Use it! 2 Corinthians 4:17 says "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all." This earthly life is not the end, we have eternal life to look forward to, thanks to the grace of God. The trials and sufferings of this world help us grow, develop us to be better people, direct us to our purpose, show us that he is always with us, build fruitfulness to help others and remind us to rely on and trust in him. God is love and gave his son so that we could have eternal life- talk about suffering! Is suffering easy, definitely not, but it does have a purpose.

John 16:33 I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.

## Community in Christ

By Jamila Siller

Every human being experiences challenging seasons in life. Seasons that test your faith, dedication and commitment to God. I recently experienced one of these seasons a few weeks ago. Sitting in my Warrior Training Ekklesia, I was exhausted and distant. My marriage was struggling, I had three young kids home for the *entire* summer, and I was responsible for maintaining our household and keeping the boat afloat. The weekend had been filled with family visiting from out of town. And what should have been a fun-filled weekend, was instead filled with frustration and stress. The tension in my life weighed on my heart. Despite how many people I had around me, I felt alone, scared, and angry. I tried to be present for the meeting, but my mind was racing elsewhere. As the evening wrapped up, one of my sisters in Christ turned to me and whispered, “Are you okay?” Another sister chimed in that I had seemed off that night. Suddenly, the floodgates opened. All the emotions I had been stuffing down bubbled to the top. I burst into tears. Immediately, the group surrounded me with love and prayed over me as I poured out my heart. Later that night, as I lay awake in bed, slightly embarrassed by my vulnerability, God whispered, “Surround yourself with people who will pick up your shield when you are too weak to put on your armor.”

We are not meant to do life alone. No war has ever been won alone. God put us on this Earth to have community with one another and lift each other up when we need help. From the creation of Adam, God created a partner, so that he would not be alone. Ecclesiastes 4:9-11 states, “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!” Having a community in Christ is not only critical to growing the body of Christ, but it is also essential to get through some of the most challenging and some of the most beautiful times in our lives. Satan strives to isolate us because when we are alone, we are vulnerable prey. Peter states, “Your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). Satan aims to isolate us and make us ashamed to be vulnerable about our struggles because when we feel alone, our thoughts begin to take control and grow roots. This is where poor decision-making, addiction and sin grow. Satan and his minions thrive on putting dark thoughts into our minds so that we cannot escape the pit of anger and fear. We believe the lies of the enemy and accept them as truth. We internalize the pain until it eventually comes out, usually hurting people or ourselves in the wake. God never intended for us to do this alone. God does not want this for His children. He loves us so much that he provides resources and community so that we do not buy into Satan’s lies, but rather lean on our Heavenly Father during times of struggle. In moments when we lose sight of faith, God wants us to lean on our fellow brothers and sisters for support.

A wonderful Pastor, Cornelius Craft from Breath of Praise Community Church, reminded me of the story of Moses when the Israelites went to war with Amalekites. Joshua fought the battle on the land, while Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the mountaintop to pray. When Moses held his hands up, the Israelites would win, but the moment he lowered his arms the Amalekites would win. When Moses’ arms grew tired, Aaron and Hur would stand on each side of Moses and hold his hands up to support him (Exodus 17:10-12). This is exactly what a community in Christ will do. They will hold us up when we grow tired and weary.

We are the most connected generation with social media, yet we have never been lonelier. The average American spends roughly 29 years online during their life, yet loneliness is significantly

increasing in young people between the ages of 16 to 24 (*Forbes: Gen-Z, The Loneliness Epidemic and the Unifying Power of Brands*, 2023). According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, suicide is the 11th leading cause of death in the US. In 2022, 49,476 Americans died by suicide.

In social media, we post every mundane aspect of our lives. We know what people do on vacation or what they ate for breakfast, but we have no idea of what kind of pain they are experiencing. We exist in a world of false communities and miss opportunities for real, meaningful connections. Instead, we have become a society focused on showing the world how “perfect” our lives are. We need to lean into being vulnerable and honest. We need to lean on a real community that is supportive and can keep our eyes focused on God no matter how frightening or hard it may be. A good, authentic community will remind you not to stray to the right or the left but to stay on God’s path because God has got us.

A community doesn’t have to be a large group. Matthew 18:20 states “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” If you are having a hard time finding a group of people you can trust begin by joining a small group, a Bible study, or an exercise group. Get involved because every single one of us goes through rough seasons in life and we can feel hopeless and lost, but if you isolate Satan can easily influence us to make a situation worse. Not only is it important to have a trusted community or group of followers in Christ, but it is also imperative that the community you have is wise and is connected to God. “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17). During my hard season, every one of my sisters in Christ told me to “be still.” This was the hardest thing for me to do, but it was wise and what God required of me in that moment. A community that has their ear and hearts toward God first will pray with you before offering wise counsel. Steer clear of people who blindly say “yes” or always agree with you. These folks might not always have your best interest at heart. Throughout the Bible, God shows us numerous times how listening to the wrong people can be detrimental. In 1 Kings 12, King Rehoboam, the son of King Solomon, is faced with a choice. Rehoboam was a young king, and the people of Israel asked him to lighten the load of labor that his father, King Solomon, had previously put on them during his reign. While the elders, recommended that King Rehoboam give the people what they were asking, he instead decided to listen to the young men he grew up with. He increased the labor, even heavier than his father, which then ultimately led to the rebellion of the people of Israel. Remember, “Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good character’” (1 Corinthians 15:33). Just because you have a group of people you can confide in, be mindful to make sure they are consulting God.

Lastly, during the process of finding a trusted community, always remember to trust in the Lord above all else. Trust is a challenging thing when you put your trust in people. People will always fall short of any expectation you have them. We are human. This is expected. However, we shouldn’t put our trust in ourselves or people, we should always put our trust in God. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5).

We all go through challenging seasons in life where our faith is truly tested. In moments when you feel like you cannot get up, a community in Christ will lift you up and give you strength. A good, authentic community will hold your shield while the enemy shoots his flaming arrows. They can give you the strength to keep going and remind you to keep your eyes focused on God. Be sure that members of this community share beliefs that are in alignment with the Word. These folks will always turn to God first before giving any sort of advice. Trust in the Lord, He will get you through this season and you **will** be preserved.

## Church History

### By David Shiramizu

July of 1989 was an inflection point in my life. At the age of 27, I gave my life to Jesus Christ at the Lord of Hosts church in Houston, Texas. Some of you have heard my testimony, but if you will indulge me, I would like to share a portion. I grew up Catholic in the state of Utah and attended private Catholic schools from grade school through high school. The “church” as I knew it was a building with stained glass windows, an altar, and statues of the Catholic church icons. With that in mind, my first visit to the Lord of Hosts church caught me totally off guard. Expecting to see a church building with stained glass windows, I was taken aback when the banner draped across a rented space of a strip confirmed my destination. “How could this be a church?”, I thought to myself. A few months later, the pastor had taught about Jesus being the head of the body, the body being the church, in Colossians 1:18. The church (ekklesia in Greek meaning an assembly or meeting) was the believers who make up the body. Coming to understand the church is more than a building, I started to wonder if the early Christian ekklesia was more effective than today.

Let’s look at the early church as described in the book of Acts. After Pentecost, Acts 2:42-47 describes characteristics of the early church/ekklesia. We read:

*42 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and [a]to prayer. 43 [b]Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and [c]signs were taking place through the apostles. 44 And all those who had believed [d]were together and had all things in common; 45 and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. 46 Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread [e]from house to house, they were taking their [f]meals together with gladness and [g]sincerity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding [h]to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

*Acts 4:32-35 says:*

*32 And the [a]congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them [b]claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. 33 And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. 34 For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the [c]proceeds of the sales 35 and lay them at the apostles’ feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.*

A few key characteristics of the early church were:

1. They were dedicated to the apostles’ teaching, meaning they were disciples of the apostles.
2. They were in fellowship and worshiped together, sharing meals and praying.
3. All things were common property to them (benevolence).

**Can the modern (western) church model what the early church looked like and be as, or more effective relative to the items above?** I think the answer is yes, but only with

an understanding of how 2000 years of cultural and technological changes have made it more or less difficult.

In most cases, the family culture in America exists where there is usually one or maybe two generations living in the same home. In New Testament times, the typical family had 2 to 3 generations under one roof. Sometimes extended families lived there as well. Family members learned to live and exist together regardless of age or oddities of a sibling. Family members took care of one another at all stages of life. Grandparents stayed in the home until death. The “odd” sibling was accepted and not treated as an outcast. America’s mobile culture contributes to the displacement of the family unit.

The level of education plays a large part in the effectiveness of the modern church. The early church communicated scripture to believers through oral communication. The father a family unit would be responsible for teaching the family, reciting over and over the teachings they heard. This was a daily occurrence. The rigidity in understanding the depth of scripture was much more intense. Matthew 4:4 says “...man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” They took this to heart and soaked up God’s word like a sponge.

The American church has the advantage of having more educated people. We are able to not only hear scripture but to be able to read it as well. But with this access to written and spoken scripture (e.g. audio Bibles), it is shocking to know how poor the Bible literacy is among American Christians. 60 percent of confessing born-again Christians cannot name five of the Ten Commandments, 81 percent don’t believe (or aren’t aware of) the basic tenets of the Christian faith, and 12 percent think that Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife.

Technology has improved the standard of living for most of the world, yet it can cause American Christians are distracted and lazy when it comes to being actively involved with the church. Go to a restaurant for dinner and notice how many families are more enamored by what is on their smartphones versus having meaningful conversations. Technological distraction also plays out in the church too. Netflix, gaming, and social media can become things that compete for your time with God. Streaming of Sunday services and sermons with the pandemic caused church attendance to drop even after restrictions were lifted.

Hebrews 10:24-25 admonishes us “... to not to forsake meeting as some have done.” We need fellowship and interactions with our brothers and sisters in Christ. The early church took care of the needs of their brothers and sisters. The American church spends the majority of its budget on staff salaries, running of the facilities, and ministries within the church. Typically, 1 to 5% is allocated for benevolence. This is in large contrast to the early church where the majority of the money was distributed to those in need. The modern church should look at the early church’s model of benevolence and make a concerted effort to make a more meaningful impact.

James 1:27 says, “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.” The early church was a closed-knit assembly of believers similar to what I would call house churches. In this intimate setting, they shared meals, cared for each other, and discussed the teachings of the apostles. In today’s church, small groups or community groups are formed to re-create that environment for the larger churches. I would challenge all believers to read Acts and the New Testament letters to

the churches at Corinth, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Galatia, and Colossae. Meditate on the letter's content and message, but also note the challenges those churches were facing.

The modern church faces much of the same, just in a different presentation. Our task as followers of Jesus is to grow deeper in our knowledge and relationship with God and to rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us. **Could we get back to the early church model?** I think we could, but it would take a drastic change in how we prioritize our individual use of time and how we structure our church to influence its culture.