

June 15, 2020

A few short months ago we were all gathered in the sanctuary on a regular basis worshipping, laughing, crying, learning ... TOGETHER.

Then, a pandemic broke out and we were torn apart, physically, scattered about, forced to be confined to our homes, away from others.

Since that time some major issues have risen, and we have become divided physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Brothers are arguing with their siblings, parents are arguing with their children, neighbors are arguing, husbands and wives can't seem to agree on anything, and the church seems to be arguing with everybody.... At least in the eyes of some.

As I was reading this morning in Jeremiah, it felt strangely familiar. The Judeans were constantly disobedient and they were overtaken by Babylon... and God allowed it to happen. But, He never intended for Babylon to remain in power over Judah. The Judeans and Israelites were blindly following their "leaders", who were leading them astray. Instead of focusing on the promises of God and what they knew to be true, they were allowing outside influences to change their thinking. Few remained faithful to God and desperately tried to persuade others to stay on the right path, but they were scattered about like lost sheep, divided, physically and spiritually.

Jeremiah 50:4-7

*In those days and at that time - this is the LORD's declaration - the Israelites and Judeans will come together, weeping as they come and will seek the LORD their God. They will ask about Zion, turning their faces to this road. They will come and join themselves to the LORD in an everlasting covenant that will never be forgotten. My people are lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray, guiding them the wrong way in the mountains. They have wandered from mountain to hill; they have forgotten their resting place. All who found them devoured them. Their adversaries said, "We're not guilty; instead, they have sinned against the LORD, their righteous grazing land, the hope of their ancestors, the LORD."*

We know, without a shadow of a doubt, that Satan is representative of Babylon and of their leaders. He is constantly leading those down the wrong path, even many members of the church. Just look around and you will see evidence of this. It's on the news, social media and even right in our own back yards.

We must not be tempted to stray from the beaten path. Many times I look at the road ahead of me and all I see is a very narrow, winding path, with weeds lining both sides of the dust covered trail. The path is bumpy, with many opportunities to stumble and fall. Why would God want me to take this path? As a Christian, aren't I supposed to experience joy and an "easier" life?

Off in the distance, I see this beautiful road, with fields on both sides covered in the prettiest wildflowers I've ever seen. There is a whole crowd of people walking down this road. They are moving along, quickly, easily; they aren't covered in dust from this beaten path. They are clean. Again, I wonder why I was not led to the same path.

Not too far ahead I can see that our paths appear to meet, maybe even crossing over each other. Yes!!!! Here's my chance! When I get there, I can easily step onto the other path. No more dirty feet, no more scraped knees from stumbling; just an easy walk the rest of the way. I race towards the

intersection but as I approach, I stop short of the beautiful road. My heart sinks as more of each path becomes visible to me.

The crowd walking along the beautiful road with fields of wildflowers on both sides is lifeless. They have very little emotion, but the emotion that is shown is one of turmoil. There's no peace in them. I see a few familiar faces and I weep. How could I not have known that they were so unhappy, so complacent... so lifeless? I try to reach for them, but I stop. What if they grab ahold of me and pull me onto the road with them?

My view of our paths changes. Their battles are different than mine, but they don't seem to have grown at all. They've been moving down this beautiful road, but they are battered and beaten. Their road may be beautifully paved and smooth, but it's hot. The fact that it is so easy to walk along the road had them moving quickly at first, but their feet are covered in blisters. They are bleeding, with no relief in sight.

As I peer down the road, I notice the road changing. It's no longer a beautiful smooth road. It's cracked, uneven, and even appears to be missing in some places. The wildflower fields have turned into fields of thorns, making it impossible to step off the road without being cut from head to toe. As I look further, I see what appears to be the end of their road. It's dark, no light, except the light from a fire. I can feel the heat of the fire from here.

I glance back at my path, my scarred knees, and my dirty feet. I recount the times that I stumbled and my knees were cut open and bleeding. I remember a helping hand, reaching out to me, pulling me back up to my feet. I can feel the cool water running over my cuts, splashing onto my feet. Every single scar that I see has fond memories. I don't remember the fall as much as I remember the healing process that took place afterwards.

Ahead of me is this beaten path, which is becoming more beautiful as the minutes pass by. As I look around, I start to realize that I was never alone on this path. There are many others here too. So many are ahead of me, and I can see that as they are walking along, they are encountering huge stumbling blocks, and they are doing their best to move them, or make them much smaller. I see many behind me, who are still stumbling, but don't appear to have quite as many scars as I have. And I remember, that each time I fell, I did my best to find what tripped me up and remove it from the path.

The best part ... I can see the end of the beaten path. The dust is turning into the smoothest, cleanest, most beautiful walking path you have ever seen. As you approach this new path, there is a pool; a cleansing pool to help you wash away the dirt from the path, and new clothes. Crowds of people are gathered there, cheering for those who cross this line. Peace fills me from head to toe.

I realize that I still have many miles to travel on this beaten path, but knowing where I'm headed makes it easier to navigate. I know it won't always be easy. I'm still going to get some bumps, cuts and bruises, but I know I have help along the way.

It is SO easy to look around us and get caught up in things going on, thinking it has to be better than what we are experiencing. There are many out there who are leading many astray, away from God. We were never promised an easy journey and we were told to consider it joy when you face trials (James 1:2). How easy we forget those words when hard times hit!

We must always remember that while we can't see the whole road ahead of us, we KNOW where the road is leading. As tough as it may be to stay on this path, as tempting as it may be to cross over to that beautiful easy road, focus on the end. *For we walk by faith, not by sight* (2 Corinthians 5:7). Call out to those who have gone before you, who learned to navigate through the obstacles, and reach out to those behind you, guiding them along this path. Last but not least, remember that you are NEVER alone. God is always right there with you.

***Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will hold on to you with My righteous right hand.*** Isaiah 41:10

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