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NOVEMBER , 2020

OUR SUFFERING NEIGHBOR

A few days ago I received a call from San Juan del Rio, Mexico, from Steve Wilson. Steve is the son of lifetime missionaries to Mexico and has been in ministry as a pastor, church planter, and conference speaker all his adult life. His wife, Blanca, is also an outstanding women's conference speaker. The church I pastored in Loveland helped support Steve's father's ministry starting back in the 1980's when Steve was a child. I started ministering in Mexico with Steve starting in the late 1990's, and Steve and Blanca flew to Loveland about 35 years ago so that I could perform their wedding.

Steve told me that the situation in Mexico is dire. The pandemic has caused many factories and stores to close, and there is massive unemployment. And lawlessness has become widespread and unstoppable. The narco-gangs are more powerful and better armed than the police and are terrorizing the population. He told me about a pastor I know in Guanejuato. I ministered in his church periodically on my visits to Mexico. He said that two men who were members of that church were murdered by a gang last week! The gangs finger some man who has a job or has a business, and the gang demands a substantial payoff each week.....and if they don't get the payoff they kill the man. He said in some cases they send a hitman to the guy's funeral and shoot some of his family. They are utterly ruthless and evil. Steve said he received a threatening phone call two weeks ago threatening that he would be kidnapped and tortured if he didn't start paying up.

Quite a few years ago, a close friend of mine, Dr. Guillermo Bremauntz, left his job of 20 years as an ER doctor in a hospital in "The City of Flowers" east of Mexico City, because a gang kidnapped the son of one of his doctor friends, and that doctor was bankrupted in paying the ransom. Guillermo knew that his turn was coming, so he moved his family to Texas and took a minimum wage job because his medical degree did not qualify him as a physician in the U.S.

I've told you in the past about the close covenant relationship that Lynne, Fred, and I have had for 25 years with another Mexican pastor, Jose Quiroz, and his son Israel and their families. On two occasions Jose's car was surrounded and stopped on a major highway and he was robbed at gunpoint by a gang. Similar things have happened to his son, Israel.

I have related these things to describe to you the decimation of a nation, our neighbor to the South, Mexico. It has been like another pandemic. Mexico is no longer a safe place to live or even to visit in my opinion. A number of years ago, I learned than many of the places our team visited for over 20 years have become off-limits, especially at night, because gangs stop cars and rob and rape.

Why has this unimaginable tragedy happened to the people of a beautiful country? In large part, because of our sin. The massive drug addiction of Americans and the billions of dollars involved has fueled the empowerment of the drug gangs in Mexico and other Latin-American countries. This, of course, is obvious and well known. In the face of so much violence, thousands and thousands of Mexicans and Peruvians and Salvadorans have been forced to flee from an absolutely untenable life in their home countries. And how have they been treated when they have attempted to flee for refuge to America? In many cases, with fear and hatred and contempt. They have been treated as criminals. In some cases, they have even been separated from their children.

Listen, there is no way in the world that I could vote for a party that endorses abortion, that tears down the ancient boundaries regarding human sexuality and that passes laws requiring all citizens to bow down to these mandates, that is hostile to Israel and the church, etc. But that doesn't mean that I am blind and indifferent to the ungodly treatment of our suffering neighbors. I understand that you can't have a nation without secure borders. But God commands us to treat the alien and stranger with respect and care. It is a conundrum, and I don't pretend to have the answer. But I also see that this huge problem is one that we, our nation, our people, have fostered by our sin. And God is very clear in saying, *Whatever you sow, that shall you also reap.* And also: *If you sow the wind, you will reap the whirlwind.* (This brings to mind the first prophetic dream I had in 1998 when I saw five or six massive tornadoes sweeping down across the United States. I was in Mexico when I had this dream and the subsequent dreams of warning.)

I wonder if the lawlessness that is even now proliferating in America is partly the law of sowing and reaping.

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SEARCHING FOR MEANING IN LIFE

John Eldredge said in one of his books that being born into this world is like coming into a movie 15 minutes late.

You don't know what they are talking about or what the plot is, so you are in a state of confusion and unreality.

In searching for meaning, people come up with a profusion of answers, but I don't think man can figure that one out. God gave to Solomon, King David's son, great wisdom: *God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore.* (1 Kings 4:29) Solomon devoted himself to finding meaning in life with great gusto.

He wrote in Ecclesiastes 2:

I amassed silver and gold for myself. It is said that Solomon became the richest man that ever lived on earth. For example: *Solomon had four thousand stalls for chariot horses, and twelve thousand horses.* (1 Kings 4:26) Solomon also accumulated *700 wives and 300 concubines!* (The insanity of it boggles the mind.)

But note the instructions that God gave to the future kings of Israel in Deuteronomy 17:16: *The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them. He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray, he must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.* Solomon broke these commandments.

Solomon had great building projects; he achieved great world-wide fame for his wisdom and his riches; he cheered himself with wine and pleasures...but he said again and again that he found it all "meaningless, vanity, foolishness." He wrote finally at the end of the book of Ecclesiastes: *Here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing whether it is good or evil.*

You have probably not accumulated as many wives and concubines as Solomon, or as much silver and gold, but have you also found life to be meaningless at times?

Picture a large sheet of white paper and in the center is drawn of square of about 4 inches. Inside the square are a number of dots that seem random. These random dots represent the meaning of life, but no one can figure out a way to connect them that makes sense. Then someone takes a pen and draws a simple five-pointed star - - that extends beyond the margins of the square, and the star touches all of the dots inside the diagram. From inside the box of our lives on earth no one has ever been able to make sense of the randomness of life, particularly the randomness of suffering and death.. But a hand came down from heaven to sketch a star that extends beyond the boundaries of life on earth and to explain the meaning of life to us. That star is the great gift of God to us, the holy Bible.

A REMINDER OF THE POWER AND WISDOM OF THE CREATOR

Remember that photograph of earth from the space capsule: in the coldness and vastness of space there is suspended a beautiful blue planet teeming with life. It is one of the planets of an average sized star, of which the astronomers estimate there are 100 thousand million (?) in our galaxy.

At the center of our little planet it is hot - a solid inner core of iron at a temperature of 8 to 11 thousand degrees and a radius of 760 miles. There is an outer core of plasma about 1,400 miles thick. This core creates the electro-magnetic shield that protects us from the sun's toxic solar wind.

Our personal star, the sun, is also hot - 27 million degrees (F) at the center, created by nuclear fusion - and it is quite large: it would contain 1.3 million earths squashed or 960 thousand earths in its spherical shape.

The earth is dependent for life on the light and heat of the sun. Only one one-billionth of the light and heat of the sun reaches earth. Chlorophyll in plants absorbs light from the sun and stores its energy in molecules through photosynthesis and uses the energy to convert carbon dioxide absorbed from the air and water into glucose, a type of sugar, which feeds animals like us. (Google makes us all geniuses.)

The sun is 93 million miles from the earth and its light takes 8.3 minutes to reach us. The nearest star to us other than the sun is *alpha centauri*, and its light takes 4.3 years to reach us.

Genesis 1 tells us that: *God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years." He also made the stars.* (It is assumed that the Bible speaks of "lights" instead of the names of the sun and moon because their names signified the names of the "gods" in the sky to the people of that time.)

I have to ask you a very delicate question: Do you believe in the God of the Bible, the Creator of the majestic universe, or are you a fool?

DON'T BE A FOOL!

It is not very nice to ask if you are a fool, but I'm just quoting the Bible.

David said in Psalm 14:1 - *The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God."*

And the book of Proverbs, which contains part of the great wisdom of Solomon, says, *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.* (Prov. 1:7).

What does it mean to "fear the Lord"? It means to

respect Him, love Him, trust Him. *Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.* (Pro. 3:5) Someone said, "If you have to have a God that you can understand, you are demanding a little God, no bigger than you are." God is a big God, He can't be contained in the little box of our comprehension.

Madame Guyon was an amazing French Christian (1458) who was imprisoned by the Roman Catholic Church after she published a book, *A Short and Very Easy Method of Prayer*. (She had the audacity to teach the common people to pray!) She wrote in her journal that she had a vision of God walking around heaven with his hands cupped before him, and He was smiling. She said, "Father, what are you looking at in your hands that is making you so happy?" He replied, "My universe." Yes, He is a big God, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent. We can't wrap our little brains around that.

If you feel that you lack "fear" or trust and reverence for God, how in the world do you get it? God tells us: *They hated knowledge, they wouldn't accept my advice and correction because they did not **choose** the fear of the Lord.* (Pro. 1:29-30) Wow! That is so important. We have to choose, to decide to believe in God, to trust Him and obey Him. From our very creation, described in Genesis, God has given us free will. God will never violate or abrogate our freedom, just as we release our grown children and never dominate or control them (hopefully).

Do you fear God? Do you love Him, trust Him, obey Him, submit your life to Him as a living sacrifice? That is when your life takes on meaning and becomes an adventure. It doesn't become easy but much harder. (*The broad and easy way leads to destruction.*) But your life becomes invested with a purpose larger and grander than our imagination can grasp.

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MEN OF FAITH

My son Chet ordered a little book, *Stories Behind Men of Faith*, and it is fascinating to see how God loves and rescues such a great variety of men and then uses them in wonderful ways to accomplish His purposes. The book looks at men like -

Bono, the rock star, whose band *U2* has been one of the most successful bands in musical history, but whose faith has led him to live out a life serving the poor. Bono has boldly challenged churches and governments to live out Matthew 25:34-40.

Charles Wesley, who with his brother John started the Methodist Church and who wrote 6,500 hymns;

Branch Rickey, who managed the Brooklyn Dodgers and broke the power of racism in baseball with Jackie Robinson, and who began *The Fellowship of Christian Athletes*;

George Washington Carver, who was born a slave, knew presidents and kings, produced concepts that dramatically changed the world of agriculture and industry. (If you have never read a biography of Mr. Carver, it would bless you to order a book about his life);

William Carey, a poor shoe-maker from a small town in England who blazed the path for a world-wide missions movement by becoming the first missionary to India - at the cost of incredible sacrifice and suffering;

Fred Rogers, of *Mister Rogers Neighborhood*, a Presbyterian minister who gave love and hope to millions of children around the world;

Nick Vujicic, who was born without arms or legs (his mother and father would not abort him and imparted the faith to him that God had a great purpose for his life), and within two years after graduating from college he had visited 20 nations and spoken to more than two million people. He has gone on to become probably the most popular speaker in the world;

Nicholas of Myra, the humble bishop of a town in Greece, whose generous life became the legend of Santa Claus;

Albert Schweitzer, the son of a Lutheran minister in Germany, who earned a doctorate in philosophy, was a world renowned musician and organist, and in middle age became a doctor and moved to Africa and built hospitals to take care of the poor.

John Newton, who was born in London in 1725. His mother was a devout Christian who filled her son with stories of Moses, David and Jesus and taught him many Christian hymns. But his father was a violent drunkard, a hard-living sailor who felt that compassion was a sign of weakness and that prayers were the practice of fools. He wanted his boy to follow in his footsteps, to be the toughest man on the seas, and to embrace a life of sinful lusts that knew no bounds. Sadly, his saintly mother died when John was just six years old.

John's father returned to the sea and left the boy on his own. By the age of ten he was running with street gangs and could out drink, out cuss, and out fight many grown men. By his 18th birthday John had sailed the Mediterranean five times and carried the scars of countless barroom brawls. But each time his father came back into his life, he assaulted his son with both words and fists. He later wrote, "I was with him in a state of fear and bondage. His sternness broke and overawed my spirit."

He ran away from his abusive father and signed on as a crewman on various ships, but he hated and defied authority, cursing and raving and fighting against all who tried to control him. Finally, when he was twenty, the officers of the *Harwich* gave up on him and left him on a small island off the coast of West Africa. He was captured by a local farmer, who treated him more like an animal than a human being. He was worked and starved and would have died but a ship's captain bought him from the farmer a year and a half later.

Newton settled into the life of a seaman on a slave trader. He worked alongside the most depraved men on earth, and he bragged that he was the worst of the lot. As many as 600 African men, women and children were chained and crammed into the stifling holds. Many died of heat and suffocation and were simply tossed over the

side of the ship.

But in March, 1748, Newton found in the ship's quarters a devotional book, *Imitation of Christ*, written by

Thomas a'Kempis, that planted a seed of faith in his heart. A few hours later Newton was awakened by a massive storm, a hurricane, that battered his ship until it almost sunk. For the first time in his adult life, Newton cried out to God for rescue. The ship did survive, and this set Newton thinking and reflecting about his life. Finally, he again cried out to God for rescue, and he was immediately touched by God's mercy and forgiveness.

While Newton was aware that he had become a new man, yet his heart had not changed regarding slave trading, and he was soon offered the captaincy of a slave trader. He continued in this evil role for six more years until he was stricken by an epileptic seizure in 1754. He was a semi-invalid and became unemployed. He started praying and reading the Bible and even learned Greek and Hebrew. He felt the calling to preach. During ten years of seeking a closer walk with God, he gradually started comprehending how evil the slave trade was and how wrong he was to have been a part of it. He then was approved to be the pastor of a church.

Newton openly confessed to his congregation how deeply he had fallen into depravity before God saved him. He was awed by God's grace, and in 1873 wrote and sang the song that has touched so many, *Amazing Grace*.

Newton would live another 34 years and lead thousands to the Lord with his messages and songs. He also wrote a personal memoir, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade* that exposed the utterly evil and cruel practices of that commerce. That book was the guiding force behind William Wilberforce's leading the movement to abolish slavery in England and in the outlawing of slavery in the United Kingdom and eventually in the United States.

In 1806 Newton was all but blind and still preaching. He knew his end was near when in 1807 he told his friends, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things, that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Saviour."

*Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed.*

*Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

*The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.*

*Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease;
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.*

In later years, the final great affirmation was added to Newton's song:

*When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun;
We've no less days to sing His praise,
Than when we first begun.*

I would like to thank each of you for your support of this ministry.
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