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**Sunday 10 October 2021 to Sunday 17 October 2021**

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Sunday 10 October 2021

# Living by faith

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!’ (Mark 10:23).**

Read Mark 10:17–31

In the early 90s, I was part of the ‘Christ Knows No Distance’ team, ‘Highway One’. A full-year commitment. I, along with, six other young people left our homes, families, jobs and security. We would visit a church and stay with them for a few weeks. We helped them with outreach in their community, and we used music, drama and testimony to share the love of Jesus. As a ‘faith ministry’, we had no income. We trusted that the Lord would provide – and provide he did! We were billeted out into the homes of generous Lutheran congregants, and gifts – monetary and in-kind – made our ministry possible. It was an amazing time of growth and challenge to see what God was doing in people’s lives and to inspire, encourage and witness.

Fast forward 20 years, and I am a wealthy man – even as pastor on extended medical leave. I own a property, vehicles, technology and a wardrobe of lovely clothes! I live in one of the richest countries in the world. God has provided me with more than I need. By world standards, I truly am a wealthy man!

So how are we wealthy Aussies and Kiwis to react to Jesus’ words? Are we to give all we have away and ‘live by faith’ as the disciples did? Maybe! I know some who have been called to live like that, just as I did for a year. But, if these verses talk about ‘how hard it is to enter the kingdom of heaven’ for the wealthy, the previous verses 13 to 16 talk about people who find it easy to enter the kingdom of heaven!

Read Mark 10:13–16.

Yes, it’s children! Why? One of my favourite Bible commentators, Brian Stoffregen, puts it like this:

I think that the reason it is harder for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God than children is that the wealthy have usually been very successful in running their lives by themselves. They don't have to be dependent on anyone. They can buy it themselves. In contrast, young children know about being dependent on others. They know that there are many things beyond their abilities to do. Perhaps that's why it is easier for them to enter the kingdom. They know that they need help and are willing to accept it.

Giving up control. Letting go, and ‘letting God!’ Not getting sucked into the eternal vacuum of materialism in a vain attempt ‘find contentment’.

Learning to let go. Learning to give. Learning to ask for help.

**Lord Jesus, in this quiet moment with you, open my ears to hear your voice. You are Lord of my life. I offer to you myself, my time and my possessions. Send me where you will. Catch me as I let go of all the trappings of this world. Help me to depend on you for all my needs. Amen.**

Monday 11 October 2021

# King David on how to run a fundraiser!

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand (1 Chronicles 29:14).**

Read 1 Chronicles 29:10–19

Have you ever been involved in building something for God’s kingdom?

Maybe your church was fundraising to update the worship centre or start a new school or school building project or start a new program.

This is the setting for today’s text. In the final years of his reign, King David has it on his heart to finally build the temple in Jerusalem. Because he had ‘drawn blood’ as a military commander, he wasn’t permitted to build it. The actual oversight of building it would fall to David’s son, Solomon. But David was the initial project manager laying all the groundwork. We read in chapter 28 that the Spirit of God had inspired David with architectural plans to build this great and glorious temple –even down to the budgetary costings of gold and silver needed for the lampstands and finery! At the beginning of chapter 29, King David has a great assembly with all the leaders, commanders and officials (the well-to-do of society). And it’s like he holds our equivalent of a fundraising gala or benefactor dinner to raise money for the project.

And then right at the high point of the event, as the money and donations are rolling in, this happens … Read 1 Chronicles 29:10–13.

Yes, they break out into a full-blown worship service! Starting with this amazing song of praise (verses 10–13) that acknowledges that everyone’s riches really belong to God anyway.

Read 1 Chronicles 29:13–20.

David breaks out into a prayer of gratefulness. Just reading it, you get the sense of the joy and excitement David had. As he prays in verse 17:

I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things I have given willingly and with honest intent. And now I have seen with joy how willingly your people who are here have given to you.

I wonder if these passages give us a model of how we can raise funds for projects the Spirit is guiding us to build.

**Praise be to you, Heavenly Father, for all the wonderful gifts you have given us to enjoy. Thank you for the LLL and the hundreds of projects it has supported over the decades. Holy Spirit, guide our communities who are building. May we worship and acknowledge you as the giver of all good things as we donate those treasures that we have that are ‘on loan’ from you. In Jesus’ name, we pray, Amen.**

Tuesday 12 October 2021

# Inspiring generosity

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**Since I was young, I have been like a father to the orphans. I have not let anyone die for lack of clothes or let a needy person go without a coat (Job 31:18,19).**

Read Job 31:16–34

Have you ever witnessed generosity that inspired you?

Some years back, my family and I went on a day tour across to Mexico from San Diego, California. Our guide knew lots of the local flavour, and although a US citizen, he had a love for the people of Mexico. We requested not to do traditional tourist trap things but meet local people and get a taste of what life was like south of the border. One thing that instantly became apparent was that our guide was generous to the poor. He would give to every beggar. He was generous to every street vendor. As we waited to cross the border, a young man came selling Spanish doughnuts. Our guide overpaid by 200 per cent. He explained later that the young man was doing this every day to pay for his education.

On our trip home, I asked him about his generosity. He said, ‘I have been given so much in this life. These people have been given so little. I see it as my responsibility to help them as much as I can’.

As I read about Job’s generosity and care for the poor and in need, I am reminded of our tour guide and his generous heart. Job’s example of generosity flows in all avenues: to those who work for him in his household (verse 31) to widows without support (verse 16) to orphans (verses 17 and 21), and the poor in general. Back in Job’s day, there was no Lutheran Care, Lutheran World Service or government social security. It was up to God’s people to provide for those in need, according to the Torah.

Read Deuteronomy 15:1–11.

Maybe we don’t see ‘beggars on the street’ where we live, but that doesn’t mean we can’t reflect the grace and generosity that God has given us or reflect that back in our dealings with our workers, those we meet who are doing it tough, or by giving to our care organisations. We don’t do this to win brownie points to get to heaven; we do this because we are going to heaven!

So, my sisters and brothers, as Hebrews 10:24 says, ‘Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds’.

Let us shine the light of our salvation and show the world God’s heart for those in need by being generous with our time, talents and possessions.

**Almighty God, giver of all good things, we thank you for your eternal generosity to us. Spur us on to give to those in need. Holy Spirit, guide us in our giving. We offer to you our organisations that work tirelessly to give and guide those in need. Thank you for all your blessings to us each day. Amen.**

Wednesday 13 October 2021

# The church doesn’t do the bystander effect

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

 **Whenever you are able, do good to people who need help (Proverbs 3:27).**

Read Proverbs 3:13–35

It was autumn 1992. I was with a fellow uni student standing at the lights ready to cross North Terrace in Adelaide in light rain. The traffic had banked up, and a young man decided not to wait. He rushed out in front of a stationary van and was instantly hit by a motorcyclist. Both went flying in the air. Time seemed to stand still. The lights changed, and people started crossing the road – ignoring what had just happened. My friend and I looked at each other and then dropped our bags and rushed in to help. Both parties had injuries that needed hospitalisation but were non-life-threatening. Later, as I reflected on the situation, I could never understand why the uni student and I were the only people who helped while others just walked by. I now know this is a known psychosocial occurrence called the bystander effect, where individuals are less likely to offer help to a victim when other people are present. But at that moment, where two people were in need, standing by and watching did not seem to gel with my faith!

Read Proverbs 3:27–32.

When I read these passages, I’m reminded of how Martin Luther expounded the Ten Commandments in the Small Catechism. It’s something I’ve always loved about them – how they don’t just tell you what not to do but what to do!

For instance, with today’s text, the sixth commandment is relevant, do not kill. We are to fear and love God so that we do not hurt our neighbours in any way but help them in all their physical needs. (If you have time, read on with the catechism and tick off which commandments with explanation are covered in this chapter of Proverbs.)

Helping people in need was core to God’s people of old. Being a bystander was not an option! Giving aid was core to Jesus’ ministry. It was what the early church became known for in the ancient world. It’s why God’s people invented the first hospitals. It’s why we started the first orphanages. It’s why we invented Lutheran Care and Lutheran Disability Services! It’s why some of our individual churches minister to refugees or the elderly. Caring is what we Christians do! It’s in the very fibre of our spiritual being – God cares for us, so we care for others.

**God of the Fatherless, God of the infirmed, God of the homeless. You reach out to us with a hand of love and care. Lord Jesus, you reached out both of your hands – and died for us. Lord, we lift up our care organisations. Bless them and their leadership. Holy Spirit, inspire us to reach out to all who need a hand. Me we be known again as the people who care. Amen.**

Thursday 14 October 2021

# A warning to all leaders

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**You have burned the vineyard. Your houses are full of what you took from the poor. What gives you the right to crush my people and grind the faces of the poor into the dirt? (Isaiah 3:14b,15a)**

Read Isaiah 3:8–15

Think about a great dynasty or a powerful government – seemingly invincible, indestructible and unassailable. Imagine it, if you will, and then imagine what could take it down. What could defeat such a thing? A giant movie monster? An asteroid impact? Surely it would be the mightiest of armies or an all-powerful weapon! It would have to be something so important, so vital, that without it, the government would disintegrate. What is it?

What will bring down Judah? It is how its government has treated the less fortunate. How it failed in is care for the poor.

You see, one of the hallmarks of God’s people of old was to be their care for those less fortunate. This is outlined in detail in Israel’s founding legal/religious documents – the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy).

God’s people were to:

* look out for the welfare of widows and orphans (Exodus 22:22)
* make sure they had legal representation and weren’t taken advantage of (Exodus 23:6),
* give them access to free produce/sustenance/welfare (Exodus 23:11, Leviticus 23:22, Deuteronomy 14:28,29)
* be generous to them (Deuteronomy 15:7)
* work towards no person being in poverty (Deuteronomy 15:4).

There are so many verses about caring for the less fortunate in the Old Testament that I can only list a fraction of them all here (there are maybe up to 100 – google it yourself!).

This is how much the less fortunate matter to God!

So if the government does the opposite and intentionally robs and grinds down the poor, well, Isaiah prophecies that it is game over for them! Boom!

How, then, do we apply this? I think what we get from Scripture is that care for the less fortunate is important from the macro-level of governance, down to smaller levels/organisations, and then to us personally on a day-to-day level.

Is this happening in our schools, organisations and churches? What programs do we have to help those less fortunate, both inside and outside of our communities? Do we need to repent and start over?

My friends, God’s generosity to us shows no bounds. It’s time we reflected that!

**Almighty Father, you are so incredibly generous to us. Every breath we take is a gift from you. Thank you for your kindness. For where we fail to reflect that kindness, Lord, we are sorry. Lord Jesus, free us from our sin. Holy Spirit, inspire us and lead us into new ways of caring for the less fortunate. Amen.**

Friday 15 October 2021

# What is your focus?

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? (Matthew 6:27)**

Read Matthew 6:19–34

What do you find yourself focusing on at the moment?

Perhaps it’s concerns about your health. Maybe it’s about work stress or relationship issues. Parents worry about their kids, and then kids, when they are adults, worry about their ageing parents! And, of course, there is the pandemic. As a shut-in who keeps the news on the TV as company, I found I had to switch it off, as it was raising my levels of anxiety! Likewise, social media tends to only feed us topics we are interested in, and if our interest is one we are concerned about, well, that is what we will see ad nauseam.

If there is a common theme in today’s text, it is ‘where is your focus?’

Verses 19–21 ask, ‘Is your focus money or wealth?’, and verses 25–31 ask, ‘Is your focus those things you need to live your daily life?’

Since my seminary days, I have been a student of Christian meditation, which at its most basic is a relaxed focus on passages of Scripture that we repeat in our mind matched to slow deep breathing. (There was an article in The Lutheran about this in March of this year, and if you are interested, my resources are on YouTube – just search Stephen Abraham music). Meditation is a form of focus where we lose track of our surroundings, where our mind goes into automatic – like when we get a jingle stuck in our head for the day or when at the end of driving on a road, we always wake suddenly. One of my mentors in Christian meditation taught me that worry is a form of ‘negative meditation’, where both our conscious and subconscious self gets fixated and caught in a loop we can’t get out of!

A stress management expert once said that only two per cent of our ‘worrying time’ is spent on things that might actually be helpful. For the rest:

* 40% is on things that never happen
* 35% is on things that can't be changed
* 15% is on things that turn out better than expected
* 8% is on useless, trivial worries.

But as obvious as that might be, it doesn’t actually help you stop if you are caught in that loop of worrying despair.

Jesus’ solution is far more profound: change your focus! Matthew 6:33 says, ‘But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well’.

You are doing that even now as you read this (assuming you haven’t drifted off or been distracted by a notification on your smartphone)! You are focusing on God’s word.

So, here’s a thought. Most of you probably know the song ‘Seek Ye First’ by Karen Lafferty, number 34 in the All Together Now book. If you don’t, just search it on YouTube. Spend the next few moments singing it, either aloud or in your head. Repeat it two or three times, and then join me in the prayer below.

**Lord God, creator of my mind, soul and spirit, one by one, I now lay at your feet my worries and concerns. Holy Spirit, guard my heart and mind against them in Christ Jesus. Throughout this day, remind me of this song and to seek first your kingdom. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Saturday 16 October 2021

# The ultimate safe place

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**You who sit down in the High God’s presence, spend the night in Shaddai’s shadow, say this: ‘God, you’re my refuge. I trust in you and I’m safe!’ (Psalm 91:9,10)**

Read Psalm 91:9–16

If someone asked you, ‘Where is your safe place?’, what would you answer? Think about it. Maybe it is a location with meaning or a time in your life where you felt secure. It could be the presence of a loved one, by yourself, or a place from your past or somewhere you access now. Visualise it for a moment. Dwell on it. Why is it a safe place for you?

After having a complete mental and emotional breakdown 15 years back, this was one of the first questions that my psychologist asked me. It was part of his work in ‘rebuilding me’ – by firstly finding a place where I could go in my mind after the threatening and emotionally unsafe place that I had been in. What was my safe place? The sheep yards at my family farm! Yards that my grandfather put together with my father, which later my father and I rebuilt. It was a place where he and I spent long, tiring hours together. It was a place where I felt closest to my family history. It’s a place I can go to even now when I close my eyes.

Psalm 91 is about the ultimate safe place: the presence of the Almighty God! A place where nothing can touch us, whether they be threats that are physical, emotional, medical or psychological. ‘The Lord is my refuge!’ That word ‘refuge’ is interesting. It is a word we don’t use much. We might think of a domestic violence refuge or hear on the news that a family took refuge during a storm or fire, or maybe we think of a wildlife refuge. Its root in Latin is from refugere – ‘to flee away’. It is, of course, related to ‘refugee’ – someone fleeing to get to a safe place!

There has been a lot of threats in our world of late. The current pandemic threatens us physically and medically, and the isolation and fear for our safety or those we love threatens us emotionally and psychologically. Many have had to seek refuge, either shut up in homes, medi-hotels or hospitals. It has been frightening and frustrating.

But my sisters and brothers, there is a safe place where nothing can touch us: the mighty arms of our God! In eternity with the Eternal, we are safe. No matter what happens, take heart! ‘God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble’ (Psalm 46:1).

**Almighty and powerful Father, you still hold the whole world in your hands. You hold me in your hands. With you, I am safe. With you, I am secure. With you, nothing can touch me. Holy Spirit, blow away my fears. Fill my heart with the secure knowledge of your salvation in Christ Jesus. In his name, we pray. Amen.**

Sunday 17 October 2021

# Blindness

by Pauline Simonsen

**James and John came to him. ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘we want you to do for us whatever we ask’ (Mark 10:35).**

Read Mark 10:35–45

Oh, the breathtaking overconfidence of James and John! They’ve got it all worked out: what they need to get Jesus to agree to and how they will do whatever it takes to get it. I’m amazed at their arrogance, both in wanting positions of power alongside Jesus and in their assumption that they can manipulate him. I totally get why the other disciples are outraged when they hear what the brothers are trying to arrange.

I love Jesus’ response to their naked machinations, though. He isn’t affronted by their arrogance; he doesn’t condemn. He deals with their demands at face value and turns the whole interaction into a teaching point, calling the disciples away from a worldview that uses authority and status as a weapon of power and abuse. He calls them to the ways of his kingdom, where authority is used as an offering of service and self-sacrifice.

Listen, again, to the boldness of the brothers’ opening demand: ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you’. Isn’t this the prayer of every one of us at some time in our lives? We mightn’t state it as bluntly or as overtly as this, but isn’t this often the guts of our prayers, too? God, you need to do this for me: heal me, help me, show me, make me, give me. Whatever I ask.

Jesus’ reply shows us the blindness of such prayers. We can’t see the full picture – where our lives are going and the ramifications of our request/demands. Only God has that 360° vision, seeing it all, knowing the beginning and the end. Jesus tries to warn the brothers, ‘You don’t know what you’re asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?’ He has only just finished telling the disciples about the cup of suffering he will drink in Jerusalem (10:35). He tries to tell them, and you and me, that the way of his kingdom is a surrender to God’s oversight. Jesus calls us away from getting power to fulfil our desires. He calls us to a willing surrendering of power to serve God and others, to give ourselves away in God’s beautiful redemptive purpose.

Just as Jesus will do in a few days, when he prays in a garden: ‘Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will’ (Mark 14:36).

**Father, forgive us our blind, arrogant demands of heart and mouth. Holy Spirit, grow in us the trusting surrender in which our Master Jesus lived and died. Amen.**