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**Sunday 3 May to Sunday 10 May**

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Sunday 3 May 2020

**A faith that trusts**

by Pastor Kevin Bell

**‘So then, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message comes through preaching Christ’ (Romans 10:17).**

Read Romans 10:5–17

Sometimes our troubles and tragedies in life are hard to understand. Recently I was asked to pray for a lady whose husband broke his hip in a fall and was admitted to hospital for an operation. She had been caring for her aunt, who is in the same hospital as her husband. In the midst of all this stress, her mother is dying.

In order to trust God we need to recognise that so much of the indecision, the uncertainties, the pain, hurt and fear we have in life doesn’t make sense. So many of our dark times are inexplicable from a human point of view. The apprehensions we might have about the future cannot always be divorced from uncertainty. Trust in God, then, is seeing our circumstances, our decisions and our reasoning through the eyes of faith. But how do we get faith? How do we receive faith so we can trust God?

Faith to trust God in all circumstances comes through the word of God alone. Only in Scripture can we find the beautiful words and promises of God that describe to us how God understands, and is involved in our hurts, tragedies and ordinary problems.

‘The Lord is near to those who are discouraged; he saves those who have lost all hope’ (Psalm 34:18). Only in Scripture do we come to know that our God through the Holy Spirit can make his word come alive in our hearts and create faith. St Paul writes, ‘I want you to know that no one who is led by God’s Spirit can say “A curse on Jesus!” and no-one can confess “Jesus is Lord” without being guided by the Holy Spirit‘ (1 Corinthians 12:3).

So, faith is not simply willpower or a decision; it is a creation of the Holy Spirit. We are dependent on God for a faith that trusts. He is waiting and willing to give us that faith.

***Heavenly Father, grant me a faith that trusts your promises that you are near. Amen.***

Monday 4 May 2020

**Watch what you eat**

by David Folker

**‘Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things’ (Philippians 4:8).**

Read Philippians 4:1–8

Years ago I remember watching a documentary titled ‘Supersize Me’, which tracked a man’s journey as he endeavoured to eat McDonalds for every meal over the course of a month. I was not-so astonished to learn that his health suffered considerably as a result of this project. The damage to his body and emotional wellbeing took almost a year to recover.

In the same way, when we over-feed our minds ‘junk’, it can take a serious toll. In the current climate there’s always fresh concerns about the outbreak and, even without thinking about it, we can consume every morsel that comes our way.

Today’s key Bible verse urges us to let pure and lovely thoughts captivate our thinking. And what could be more worthy of praise than Jesus? For when we do this ‘the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus’.

Feed from the Bread of Life. I’m sure that Jesus shared this analogy with us for a reason!

***Dearest Jesus, you are the Bread of Life. You are worthy of my praise. I thank you for everything that you accomplished at the cross. Keep my eyes fixed on you. Fill me with the peace which surpasses understanding, and lift me above the waves of despair. Amen.***

Tuesday 5 May 2020

**The underside**

by Jane Mueller

**‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways’, declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts’ (Isaiah 55:8,9).**

Read Isaiah 55

In her poem *Life is but a Weaving*, Corrie ten Boom describes her life as a tapestry. Corrie is on the underside of the tapestry. From her perspective it’s not clear why dark threads are required. God, however, weaves from the upperside. He sees the need for light and dark, for he is privy to the magnificence of the whole picture.

When we criticise or complain about the decisions of those in authority, we assert judgement without all the facts. In our naïve small mindedness, we fail to discern that we are on the underside of the tapestry – the side where the darkness doesn’t make sense and the threads appear loose and messy. We are unable to see or admire the big picture, or to appreciate the purpose and value of each thread. We question why certain threads are prioritised in ways that don’t make sense from our perspective. We find fault with the pace of those weaving the tapestry, not appreciating that the gathering and preparing of different threads often involves complexities not visible from the underside.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul explains that God calls people into positions of authority. When we are disrespectful towards those in authority, we are disrespectful towards God.

We do not need to busy ourselves with opinions about the work of those in authority. For us to impose our criticism is not only unhelpful, but it brings a stress into our lives that God did not ordain.

There is peace in knowing God calls and equips those in authority. There is peace in trusting that God is in control. There is peace in living by faith and not by sight. There is peace in knowing God’s ways are not our ways. There is peace on the underside.

***Gracious Father, we give you praise and thanks that the leaders of our nations accepted your calling. We bring before you especially at this time of our Australian and New Zealand prime ministers, premiers and chief ministers, and LCA/NZ and District bishops. Bless them in abundance. Overwhelm them with your limitless love, grace and mercy, just as you fill them with strength and wisdom. Amen.***

Wednesday 6 May 2020

**Dressing for the season**

by Pastor Reid Matthias

**‘You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy’ (Psalm 30:11).**

Read Psalm 30

Church clothes.

I remember every Sunday, my parents would wake us early so that we could be scrubbed up and ready for worship. Included in this weekly ritual, was the ‘opportunity’ to wear our ‘church clothes’, which consisted of anything that had a collar, and not blue jeans. To be honest, these church clothes were not my favourite. In David’s terms, they were like sackcloth to me.

But when we returned home, I quickly donned my ‘play clothes’, which were anything without a collar, and blue jeans. These gave me great joy. I knew that I was about to head out into the world to experience the wonder of limitless joy.

I wonder what David’s ‘church clothes’ were like? It sounds like his wardrobe for worship changed all the time, whether sackcloth of lament when it seemed as if Israel was being overridden by their enemies, or a garment of joy during times of festive peace. This psalm, a song used for the dedication of the temple, gives us a great insight into the true dichotomy of his life.

Sometimes we must sit in the ashes in sackcloth. Sometimes we must be patient and wait on God’s timing. During this painfully frustrating process, we recognise that the world still spins and God is in control.

Other times, we are clothed with joy. What are the things that give you joy in this season?

***Heavenly Father, give us patience in the time of trials and hopeful expectation, so that we might experience the joy in the morning as it comes. Amen.***

Thursday 7 May 2020

**The Isenheim altar**

by Rachael Stelzer

**‘For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin’ (Hebrews 4:15).**

**Read Hebrews 4**

The Isenheim altar is the main treasure of a museum in Colmar, in the Alsace region of France. Painted in the early 1500s by Matthias Grünewald, it folds out to reveal a number of scenes from the Bible.

Upon first glance the painting of Jesus’ crucifixion is disturbing, ghastly, even surreal. His body is green, covered in open sores. It seems unnecessarily confronting. With all the indignity and pain that crucifixion involved, why would an artist add these bizarre features to the dying Jesus?

In reading the history and purpose of the altar, all becomes clear. Grünewald painted the altar for the monastery of St Anthony in Isenheim. The monks of this order were well known for treating victims of the plague and skin diseases. These diseases caused sufferers to develop blisters and gangrene, turning their skin green.

The artist’s message? Jesus knows your suffering. Jesus has felt your pain. He has gone through all the frustration, all the grief, all the uncertainty you will ever face. And he’s taken it to the cross for you.

If Jesus were to be represented in artwork today, he might be painted as a strung-out mother with expectations dragging from all sides, or as a dad whose lost his job because of COVID shutdowns, or as a lonely, confused child or teenager trying to make sense of a crazy world – or as someone like you.

***Dear Jesus, what a comfort to know that you are not distant, aloof and untouchable, but that you are a friend who’s been through pain, grief, loss, frustration, stress and loneliness – and all for us. Amen.***

Friday 8 May 2020

**Keep on praying**

by Pastor Robin Stelzer

**‘Suffering?  … keep on praying about it’ (James 5:13)**

Read James 5:13–16

Paul and Kim were in Fiji recently. Suddenly, getting home became their emergency. God’s way of responding may not be with a flight ticket, but he does always fly you to his heart, his promises and his peace. Paul and Kim were drawn to Psalm 91. Kim called the airline. With people around the world all trying to return home, flights were full. She was told to try tomorrow. Suddenly, a minute later, the phone rang. ‘We just had a cancellation. You can fly.’ With joy and relief they thanked God for a miracle. Paul explained, ‘We took a snap of the number by using the other phone. It was all sevens, God’s number in the Bible. Thinking how strange it was, we tried that number the next day. There was no connection, no such number. God had outstretched his arms to us.’

Christ longs for us to stay connected with him by prayer. Right now we are struggling with many kinds of suffering: fears, isolation, turmoil, anxiety, confusion. The prayer connection brings miracles. The one we most need is God’s love and nearness – for times of crisis as well as calm.

‘The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and wonderful results’ (James 5:16).

Now is a time of miracles. Strangers and friends reach out with care. Medical and service staff take health risks to help. We are breaking out of our modern privacy, despite looking from behind face masks and manoeuvring around the rules of separation. Let’s encourage each other, and thank God!

Prayer is not a duty, but a gift of connection with Christ. He makes us all part of his answer of love for us, and those around us who are suffering. So we keep on praying.

***Risen Lord Jesus, we hear you calling us back to the constant closeness of your love. Break us out of our privacy to recognise your great power and wonderful results as we keep on praying. Amen*.**

Saturday 9 May 2020

**The Aaron and Hur Club**

by Sal Huckel

**Aaron and Hur held [Moses’] hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset (Exodus 17:12).**

Read Exodus 17:8–13

Moses was a leader who grew tired. Reading this scripture a number of years ago now, I realised that even leaders need someone to hold their arms up every now and again. This includes pastors, teachers, parents and even includes children, especially the eldest children or those who might have leadership roles of different kinds at home or school. It’s okay to need our arms to be held up. It’s okay to be tired. We are the body. We can hold up one another’s arms when we are weary and need help.

We have had beautiful times when our older children have stepped up to their leadership qualities and held our arms up with the gift of a beautiful letter of encouragement and scriptures. Within our families, churches and communities, we can support each other, and go with the natural ebb and flow of energy, stress levels and emotional capacity. We all need our arms held up sometimes.

I recently heard of a church where a pastor and his wife had found all sorts of encouragements and helps left for them by an informal and anonymous ‘Aaron and Hur Club’. What a lovely picture. As kids we always loved to form clubs. Maybe you can form an ‘Aaron and Hur Club’ and pray for the opportunity to hold up someone else’s arms to support them in their responsibilities – someone who is normally a leader but who might be feeling weary right now.

***Lord, we are tired! Thank you for this example that shows us that in the midst of a battle, leaders grow tired. We ask you to show us how we, like Aaron and Hur, can hold up our leaders’ arms when they grow tired. Rest is hard to find, and we know that you are here also, our Rock, holding us all up while we wait for the sun to set on this battle. In Jesus’ name, Amen.***

Sunday 10 May 2020

**When all else fails, trust**

by Pastor Kevin Bell

**‘Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight’ (Proverbs 3:5).**

Read Proverbs 3:1–12

In the book of Hebrews there is this wonderful reassurance from God: *‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you’* (verse 13:5b). God wants us to know he is absolutely trustworthy, no matter what our circumstances may indicate. He wants us to firmly hold onto his promise that he has not left us to the mercy of fate or any other fearful circumstances. God says to us in the words of Jeremiah 29:11: *‘For I know the plans I have for you’ …’plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’*.

But human energy runs out. Often after a time of trial, hurt, pain, struggle with fear, or uncertainty about the future, we don’t seem to have any energy left. Human endurance and willpower runs out. In the dark valleys of life we need a power and energy source bigger than ourselves. If we think we are going to make it through all the valleys of life on our own power, then we will be sadly disappointed.

When all else fails God calls us to rely on his strength, his power and his care. *Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you*, says 1 Peter 5:7.

If you look at the world, you’ll be distressed.
If you look within, you’ll be depressed.
If you look at Christ, you’ll be at rest.

***Heavenly Father, you are our true and certain hope when our energy runs out. We will trust in you. Amen.***