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**Sunday 5 July to Sunday 12 July**

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Sunday 5 July

# Negativity and positivity bias

by Jane Mueller

**'Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope' (Romans 5:3,4).**

Read Romans 5:1–5

From minor annoyances to major disasters, our bias towards a specific episode of suffering can change over time.

Psychology research shows that, in our human condition, our short-term attention is biased towards negativity while our long-term attention is biased towards positivity. Typically, we tend to reflect on past episodes positively regardless of how we felt at the time. This is, at times, attributed to how reflection exposes the benefits and growth that evolves through suffering. When we are in the moment, in our brain’s effort to protect us from imminent harm, our negativity bias tends to kick in, warping our vision of long-term positive outcomes.

God gets our attention through suffering as we are reminded of our dependence on him. Suffering stimulates our thirst for him; it is an invitation to draw near to him. And his response reveals his sovereignty. When suffering strikes and adversity sets in, an earnest heart of thankfulness and trust reminds us that the joy of the Lord is our strength.

There is no need to run and hide from suffering, and there is no need to allow our negativity bias to kick in, because God brings good out of all things. We know that suffering produces: it accomplishes, it generates, it engineers endurance, character and hope. And with hope, we’re never left short-changed.

***Lord God Almighty, I accept all my sufferings in your name, and I offer them to you to use for your purposes. Teach me to rejoice in these times, knowing they are a means of producing hope and drawing closer to you. Amen.***

Monday 6 July 2020

# Troubles provide perspective

by Jane Mueller

**‘God’s angel sets up a circle of protection around us while we pray’ (Psalm 34:7).**

Read Psalm 34

What is troubling you today? A natural disaster, terrorism, a pandemic? Sickness, divorce, financial ruin? A tight deadline, a toxic colleague, a difficult conversation?

What challenges lie ahead for you tomorrow?

Fact: there are troubles in this life. There is grief, torment, pain, trauma, struggle, sadness and confusion. In our human frailty, we often cry out to God to eliminate our troubles. But what if we’re asking the wrong question? What if troubles serve a necessary eternal purpose?

Troubles are not a sign of God’s punishment, nor are they a sign of God’s absence. Troubles provide perspective. They highlight our dependence on God. It is often through our troubles that God’s glory is showcased and that we grow in a deeper relationship with him.

God didn’t remove the flames surrounding Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. God didn’t destroy the lions in the company of Daniel. God doesn’t promise to rescue us from our troubles, but he does promise to bring us through them. After all, we don’t walk *into* the darkest valley, we walk *through* it. We need fear nothing because God is with us.

Be confident in the promises of God. Trust in his presence and his provision. Do not let troubles consume your mind, but let God be at the centre of your thoughts. Your circumstances are not about you and your troubles; they are about you and your relationship with God.

If you’re in a fire today or if you’re surrounded by lions, know that through prayerful expectation God’s angel is right there with you, guarding you in all your ways and guiding your feet into the path of peace.

***Heavenly Father, let your holy angel be with me, so that the evil one may have no power over me. I rest in the knowledge of your promise that fires will not burn me and lions will not crush me. Let my troubles be a testimony to your work in my life. Remind me that my troubles are momentary, and eternal glory far outweighs them all. In Jesus’ name, Amen.***

Tuesday 7 July 2020

# These peace boots are made for walking

by Jane Mueller

**‘Stand firm then … with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace’ (Ephesians 6:16).**

Read Ephesians 6:10–18

Jesus tells us that we will experience difficulties in this world, but that he has conquered the world and deprived it of power to harm us. And he imparts to us a gift that is not of this world: the gift of his perfect and constant peace.

If your experience of peace comes and goes according to circumstances – maybe aided by soft music, aromatherapy oils and the absence of troubles – this is not the peace that Jesus speaks of. In his sneaky ways, Satan offers us a worldly peace that is conditional on environmental factors and emotions.

The peace that Jesus offers, *shalom*, is an indescribable, lasting state of wellbeing and spiritual connection. It is unshaken by circumstances and, in fact, is often most evident in the midst of turmoil and conflict. It’s abundant, it’s unfathomable and it’s uncomplicated.

God desires to guide our feet into the path of peace. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul tells us to have our feet fitted with the readiness of the gospel of peace. We have peace boots! Satan sets out to disrupt our peace, but his lies of fear, uncertainty and anxiety are no match for our peace boots. And these boots are made for walking. So, get out there and be ready to share the gospel of unshakable, assured and deep peace with everyone you encounter.

Be strong in the Lord and his mighty power. With your peace boots secured, you are primed to not just cope with today’s circumstances as Satan would have you believe, but also to thrive amid today’s circumstances as you walk in step with Jesus. Overflowing with peace, trust and thankfulness, fearlessly march into today and ensure your peace boots inspire others to also seek such lavish favour.

***Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Prince of Peace. Amen.***

Wednesday 8 July 2020

**Predictable, identical and consistent? Or quirky, radical and rebellious?**

by Jane Mueller

**‘Do not conform to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind’ (Romans 12:2a).**

Read Romans 12:1–8

The first and second Industrial Revolutions seemed to change everything. Among a myriad of advancements, this era galvanised the shift from unique handmade items to the mass production and standardisation of goods. With this shift came the new expectation that goods would be predictable, identical and consistent.

Do we allow our familiarisation with predictable, identical and consistent goods to influence the company we keep? Do we seek to be surrounded by people who are predictable, identical and consistent? Do we find comfort among those who are compliant and congruous?

It’s easy to be caught in an echo chamber; to be swept up in a world of like-minded people who agree with us, thereby reflecting and reinforcing our own opinions and bias. Echo chambers not only polarise us and keep us obliviously closed-off from the wider community, but they also prevent us from growing into a deeper relationship with God and with others.

When we find ourselves surrounded only by people fresh from our world’s cookie-cutting assembly line, we become detached from the richness of God’s creation, which in turn limits the renewing of our mind.

Jesus did not conform to the patterns of our world. He certainly was not born from an assembly line. He was a misfit. He was quirky, radical and rebellious. Some might say he was off-centre and unbalanced – unhinged even. He challenged the status quo. And because of these things he was rejected by worldly and religious authorities. But he spoke truth, he spoke love, and he spoke life. He challenged people in strange, unusual and peculiar ways (according to the day’s societal norms). He renewed the minds of those who would listen.

Well beyond his time on earth, Jesus continues to speak truth, love and life through wonderfully made non-conformist, offbeat, reformist renegades.

So, who challenges you? Who opens your mind? Who stretches your thinking? Who expands your heart? Who helps you to venture out of your echo chamber? Which quirky, radical or rebellious people does Jesus speak through, and into, your life?

***Father, Son and Holy Spirit, transform me by the renewing of my mind from the inside out, and let me find comfort among the discomfort of the unpredictable and unfamiliar. Open my eyes to the quirky, radical and rebellious people you place in my path, who speak your words of truth, love and life in order to help me grow in relationship with you and with others. Move me to be maladjusted to this world’s culture and fully aligned with your good, pleasing and perfect will. Inspire me to be undignified and non-conforming in my love for you and for others. Amen.***

Thursday 9 July 2020

# Meeting people in their world

by Jane Mueller

**‘Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible’ (1 Corinthians 9:19).**

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19–23

Jesus came to earth when it was functioning under the Old Covenant. The Ten Commandments were essentially a list of ‘thou shalt nots’. The New Covenant is uncomplicated and explicitly relationship-oriented: love God, and love each other. In his typical radical way, Jesus outrageously paraphrased the old law by flipping our perspective of the ‘thou shalt nots’ with a simple ‘thou shalt do’: love.

Throughout his ministry on earth, Jesus lived love. He did not tell people what to do. He did not dogmatically impose beliefs on them or relentlessly demand that they comply. Rather, he repeatedly demonstrated that the way to garner followers is to know them, to meet them where they’re at, to walk with them and to invite them into a relationship of love.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul illustrates that relationships require us to meet others in their world, in order that we might save some. We become a Jew to win the Jews. We become weak to win the weak. We become under the law to win those under the law. And vice versa. We become an artist to win the artists. We become a historian to win the history buffs. We become a baby boomer to win the baby boomers. We become a millennial to win the younger generation.

We become. And we love. We selflessly, compassionately and unconditionally love.

This devotion can be summed up in two quotes. The author of the first quote is unknown, yet the words are often attributed to St Francis of Assisi: ‘Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words’.

And secondly, in Anthony McCarten’s play *The Confession*, which was recently released as *The Two Popes* on Netflix, the future Pope Francis absolves the current Pope Benedict, adding: ‘Remember, truth may be vital, but without love, it is also unbearable’.

***Heavenly Father, what does love require of me today? Amen.***

Friday 10 July 2020

# Freedom: outrageous, extravagant, radical, ours

by Jane Mueller

**‘Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom’ (2 Corinthians 3:17).**

Read 2 Corinthians 3:7–18

What controls you? Is it the demands or expectations of others? Is it the desire to be respected or admired? Is it the fear of being judged by your words, actions or appearance? Is it the compulsion to have the latest gadgets and accessories? Is it the obligation to return every phone call and reply to every text message, email or notification? Is it the need to be seen engaging in religious practices?

We cannot serve multiple masters. It is not possible to live under the control of others, while also living in authentic communion with God. When we let others’ expectations – or our perception of their expectations – drive us, we abandon our genuineness, and we abuse the freedom gifted to us through God’s ultimate sacrifice.

Jesus died to set us free. This includes freedom from a preoccupation with the demands and expectations of others. In God’s presence, these demands and expectations – real or perceived – fade into insignificance. After all, there is no condemnation for those who live in Christ.

When we thank God for the circumstances that seem to sap our emotional energy, God’s power and presence are revealed, giving us perspective, peace, joy and freedom. The freedom we receive in and through Christ is outrageous. It’s extravagant, it’s radical – and it’s ours.

‘On the eve of the cross, Jesus made his decision. He would rather go to hell for you than go to heaven without you’ (Max Lucado).

God went to immeasurable lengths to secure this freedom for us. Let’s not squander it.

***Jesus Christ, you have set us free, and we are free indeed. Speak to us, and let us hear your voice of freedom louder than the many voices of the enemy. Amen.***

Saturday 11 July 2020

# Philos: friend

by Jane Mueller

**‘I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you’ (John 15:15).**

Read John 15:9–16

I’m drawn to the words of columnist Doug Larson: ‘A true friend overlooks your failures and tolerates your successes’.

A friend doesn’t just love you: a friend actually likes you. A friend doesn’t endure you: a friend desires to be in your presence. A friend doesn’t bring performance pressure: a friend empowers you to freely be yourself. A friend doesn’t love you for who you will become: a friend loves you for who you are today.

Authentic friendship means being so vulnerable that you give the other person enough ammunition to annihilate you, trusting that they won’t.

It’s almost inconceivable, then, that Jesus, the King of Kings, calls us his friend. But it’s true. We do not need to earn his friendship, and there is nothing we can do to lose it. Quite simply, we are friends with the king! This means we are highly favoured and given special honour. This means *you* are highly favoured and given special honour. You are invited to come just as you are into Jesus’ presence, where you are empowered to freely be yourself.

Nothing can separate us from the loving, healing and sovereign presence of our friend, Jesus. He loved us before we were loveable. His friendship goes above and beyond. After all, he humbled himself and took on the sin of every human being – those who lived before his time, those who lived during his time, and those of us who live today – by laying down his life for us all. Through him, we are eternally connected to friends around the globe.

***Jesus, what a friend we have in you! Your friendship carries us through each day. Thank you for loving us unconditionally and for the abundant favour you pour over us. Your grace is immeasurable. Amen.***

Sunday 12 July

# Good soil

by Pastor Glenn Crouch

**‘But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it’ (Matthew 13:23).**

Read Matthew 13:1–9,18–23

For many of us, this parable is well known, and we see in it an explanation of why Jesus’ ministry (and perhaps our church’s) is not as fruitful as we might expect. However, as we journey in this week of devotions, let’s not think of ourselves as the sower; let’s leave the Lord Jesus to be the sower. Rather, read the parable again and picture yourself as the various places the seed lands.

We want to be the ‘good soil’ of verses 8 and 23. We don’t want to fall victim to the evil one (and we pray this in the Lord’s Prayer). We don’t want suffering to draw us away, and we don’t want to be led astray by our worries and our desires for the wealth of this world. Rather, we want to hear the word, and we want to understand what we hear.

Through the death and resurrection of our dear Lord and Saviour, we have been made daughters and sons of the Most High God. We have received much, so it should be natural that we want to learn more about Jesus, more about our Father, and more about the Holy Spirit. We are called to be disciples (those who learn), and that is the way of the ‘good soil’.

***Father, I need your help to be the good soil, so that I can hear your word and not be distracted from it. Protect me from the evil one, from the ways of the world, and from my own selfish desires. Help*** ***me to understand what your Holy Spirit is teaching me. In Jesus’ precious name, Amen.***