

# Faith Pulpit

## Discipleship in the Wilderness

### Helping Our Fellow Believers Live Out the Pursuits of Psalm 63

In the July/August issue of The Baptist Bulletin, Dr. Jeff Newman, professor of Biblical Counseling at Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary, wrote an article titled “Dependence in the Wilderness.” In that article, [available here](#), Dr. Newman explored Psalm 63 and its implications for growth during difficult circumstances. This Faith Pulpit article builds upon his previous work by applying the Biblical concepts to discipleship ministries. For a more thorough study of these concepts, you may purchase his most recent book, Dependence in the Wilderness (Regular Baptist Press, 2015).

This side of glory all of us will walk together with brothers and sisters who face arid regions of this life’s wilderness. In the eighth grade, Mary faces constant pressure from her unbelieving friends to turn her back on her faith. Now her friend, Sue, who in the past had encouraged Mary in her walk with the Lord, offers Mary a joint and scorns her when she refuses. Mary sits crying in your office, struggling to believe that God is truly a friend when He allows her other friends to forsake her.

Tom, a high school senior, loses his girlfriend, Joanne—a new Christian—to a drunk driver. You stand with Tom and Joanne’s unbelieving family at the head of the casket. You see the why? questions in their eyes.

John and Kim hold the lifeless body of their first son, born just hours earlier. You look on the scene with tears in your eyes.

Jane faces chronic pain. Every day of her life is an uncertainty. Will the intensity of the pain control life’s agenda today, or will good days lead to a false hope that perhaps the intense pain will go away and never return?

Dan watches, waits, and tries to comfort his father who is dying of cancer. He looks at you and says, “My dad is the strongest Christian I know. He never wavered in his trust in God. Why would God allow him to suffer such a slow and difficult death? He always wanted to die quietly in his sleep just like Mom did last year.”

Chuck cares for his wife day after day for eight years as Alzheimer’s slowly takes her away from him. He tells you he never really knew loneliness until now, as he describes how it feels to remind his wife of 50 years of his name several times each day.

With fear in his voice, Jim calls to tell you he was laid off from his job. “What will I do?” he cries. “This is the only job I have known for 15 years. How will I keep the kids in college? Who wants to hire a fifty-five-year-old accountant?”

During these times, God’s people need brothers and sisters in Christ to walk with them and with care and compassion point them to their God. During these times, we who are called upon to point others to Christ need to know how to help them turn in faith to God.

How do we evaluate the wilderness walk of fellow believers when so much seems to happen to them so quickly, or when their burdens seem to weigh heavily day after day with no end in sight? How do we encourage them to depend on God in the midst of the deep difficulties of life? How do we ourselves continue to turn in dependence on God as our own and others’ trials merge together to challenge our confidence in God?

In Psalm 63 we discover that David purposed in his heart (1) to seek after his God; (2) to meditate on his God; and (3) to bring praise to his God. These three pursuits, the themes of dependence on God in Psalm 63, lead us to focus on what is important in times when so much screams for our attention. These pursuits assist us as we evaluate our fellow believers’ dependence on God. These pursuits also provide structure for us as we seek to identify and develop key themes with those who are walking through life’s arid regions.

## **SEEK GOD EARNESTLY**

As we walk beside fellow believers through times of startling crises, we must first and foremost encourage them to seek after God—to trust Him and live for His glory. Why? Because when crisis comes, people are vividly reminded that they need someone or something outside themselves in which to trust. A crisis reminds us of our finiteness. We cannot go it alone.

In contrast to the often surprising, breathtaking intensity of a crisis, some sufferings settle down and make themselves at home, unwelcome guests in the lives of those to whom we minister. During these times we must also encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ to cling to God, to seek after Him as a starving animal foraging for food, and to thirst for Him when no other thirsts of their souls are, or can

be, satisfied.

Lives change in the crucible of suffering and crisis. In these times, God graciously reveals to His people the objects of their trust that have subtly replaced their complete trust in Him. God wants His people to see Him alone as worthy of all their trust, all their love, and all their allegiance. God wants to use those of us who walk through crises with His children to encourage lovingly and vigilantly our suffering brothers and sisters to a sustained trust in Him.

### ***Evaluating Trust***

Listening. In times of sorrow and grief, we must move into the lives of our brothers and sisters with a quiet confidence in God and with thoughtful, Christlike concern. We must begin by listening. All of us know Proverbs 18:13, “He who answers a matter before he hears it, It is folly and shame to him.” Yet, in the midst of crisis and suffering, all of us need to be reminded that we are serving people, not solving problems. As a result, we must listen to people and strive to know them from the perspective of God’s Word.

If we fail to spend time with people, listening and observing in the midst of sorrow, we will fail to represent God accurately. When we fail to represent God accurately, we will unwittingly encourage fellow believers to turn from God rather than to turn to Him. Loving people with God’s love demands that we love them enough to listen to them. If we are to serve as God’s mouthpiece, we must learn to listen with God’s ears.

As we listen, we must seek to know this person in this experience. We listen for his anxieties. To what fears is she tempted to surrender? Where do we hear him express anger at God, others, or himself? We must resist the immediate temptation to address each individual fear, anxiety, or point of anger.

The key is to listen and observe, watching for themes and patterns. In the disorientation of a crisis, as well as in the moments where ongoing suffering overwhelms, anxieties, fears, and anger come and go like leaves tossed in the wind. We must focus our attention on those fears, anxieties, and frustrations that begin to settle down and take root in the lives of those to whom we minister.

As we listen, we must not only look for problems, but we must also look for areas where our brothers and sisters evidence submission to God’s work in their lives. We must rejoice in God’s work as they turn from their moments of fear, anxiety, and anger, demonstrating trust in God. We should be quick to speak words of encouragement to them. We must tell them where we see God at work. We should be careful to rejoice not only in the momentary relief from or even resolution of the crisis or suffering, but we also should always rejoice in God’s work of sanctification in those who face continued suffering.

## ***Discerning Patterns***

As we listen and rejoice, we will also learn. As we begin to see patterns of anxiety, fear, or anger, we will hear themes of trust. We will hear whom or what our brothers and sisters are tempted to seek after more than, or in the place of, seeking God. Anger, anxiety, and fear reveal desires that vie for the allegiance of our hearts—desires that compete against our trust in God.

When do our fellow believers crave relief more than they crave God? When do they demand others' support more than they rest in God's care, thanking Him for others' care and concern? Where do they thirst for control over their problems more than when they drink from the living water freely given by the One Who suffered before them and for them? We need to pray and ask God to help us understand our brothers and sisters from His perspective so we can, in turn, minister His grace to them in a way that will help draw their hearts to Him.

## ***Asking Questions***

As we listen, we should also ask wise, heart-focused questions. As we walk beside God's children in the midst of sorrow, we must take the opportunity to sharpen our abilities to understand people in biblical ways. We must learn to ask questions that allow us both to learn about and also to help others to reflect on their hearts before God.

As we learn by listening and asking wise questions, the far-sighted shepherding ministry of counseling takes place. We begin to formulate answers to some serious questions. How do we help our brothers and sisters grow in their dependence on God? How do we help them cling to the goal of judging the success of their wilderness journey on the basis of their ability to reflect God's glory—becoming like Him in the midst of their sorrow and suffering? We answer these questions in the moments we spend with fellow believers and by what we encourage them to do in the moments we are apart from them.

## ***Encouraging Trust***

As we learn the themes of our brothers' and sisters' temptations to shift their trust from God and to seek after the false gods of comfort, control, security, affirmation, happiness, and many others, we then seek to direct their attention to the God Who alone is worthy of all their love and devotion. When we find our brothers and sisters wavering in their trust in God's faithfulness, we must demonstrate Him to be faithful. When they waver in their belief in His goodness, we must direct them to God Who did not withhold His Son but freely gave Him up on their behalf. When they are tempted to believe that God has dozed off or deserted them, we must point them to God Who is always attentive to His children's cries. Once again, we look for patterns and themes of doubts and combat them with patterns and themes of truth about God's character and works.

Praying. We present the truth about God to fellow believers through prayer. In prayer, we talk to God about the burdens of their hearts and ours. In prayer, we express our trust in God. In prayer, we direct our brothers and sisters seeking after false refuges to take refuge instead in the one true God—seeking only Him, longing for Him, thirsting for Him alone. In prayer, we remind each other of God’s presence and concern.

Prayer should be a natural part of our personal ministry in crisis and suffering. We ought to pray with and for our fellow believers as they face the arid wilderness. We ought to encourage our fellow believers to cry out to God in the midst of their pain and suffering. When they do, we must listen attentively to their cries and learn about their view of God. In turn, as we talk to God in their presence, we can emphasize key aspects of God’s character and works. We can learn how to pray this way by reading the Psalms. Psalm 63, of course, provides an entry point for this type of prayer. Psalms 61 and 62 follow a similar pattern. We should consider Psalms 54–56 when suffering is inflicted upon our brothers and sisters by others. We can also learn from the prayers of the apostle Paul in his epistles. For example, consider Ephesians 1:15–23, 3:14–21, Philippians 1:8–11, and Colossians 1:3–29.

Living Christ. As we encourage people to seek after God, we should not overlook the importance of who we are as we minister in the lives of others. The ways we live our lives before our brothers and sisters in the midst of their suffering will influence them either to move in faith toward God or to move in doubt away from Him. We should always be asking ourselves, “How can we model God’s moral attributes before our brothers and sisters in Christ and in so doing direct their attention to Him?”

Jim simply sat with his friend Barry as they waited to hear of the outcome of Barry’s wife’s emergency surgery. Later Barry testified, “Jim’s presence with me reminded me that God is always present.” Amy organized her Sunday school class to provide snacks for a soon-to-be-mom confined to a hospital bed for several weeks due to complications. In this, Amy reminded her friend of her God Who always provides. Sherry sends a note to her friend, Alison, every year on the anniversary of the death of Alison’s daughter. This simple note of remembrance points Alison to her God Who always remembers her pain and sorrow—the God Who feels her every heartache. Every morning during his first month back at work, Don is greeted by a quick e-mail from his pastor expressing concern for Don after the death of his wife. Don is reminded that his God cares because he sees his pastor care. Do you see it? As we move into people’s lives in the midst of their sorrow, we have the wonderful privilege of helping people draw close to God as we reflect Him to them.

Reading and Studying the Scriptures Together. In addition to prayer, we can direct the hearts of our brothers and sisters to trust in and seek after God by reading and studying the Scriptures with them. As we listen and learn about their struggles to cling to God and to seek after Him in the midst of the suffering, we must work to connect their experiences to the truth of the Scriptures. We must always ask ourselves, “What Scriptures brightly shine God’s character and works into this person’s life, dispelling

fears, calming anxieties, and turning him or her from sinful anger to patient trust?”

One of the best places to begin is to seek to discover what passages of Scripture have brought help and comfort to our brothers and sisters in the past. We should encourage them to share with us how God has comforted and directed them and then led them to return to the places in Scripture where they have grown in their worship and love for Him. Not only will this direct their hearts to God now, but it will also remind them and us of God’s past faithfulness, building hope in God’s continued faithfulness. Another beginning point could be the ways God has used the Scriptures to bring us comfort. Here, we can draw upon the comfort God has provided for us and share it with our fellow believers, encouraging them to entrust themselves fully to our good God. As we spend time with them in the midst of their sorrow, we dare not neglect the simple reading of and reflection on the Scriptures. We should share our hearts as we unite with them around God’s Word.

Encouraging a Dependent Walk with God. We should look for ways to encourage our brothers and sisters to turn to God on a daily, even moment-by-moment, basis. Here are some suggestions of ways we can encourage them to seek God. Each one could provide a rich basis for pointing our fellow believers to a fuller faith in God. Add your own ideas to the list. Personalize the list for those people God has entrusted to you in your ministry.

- Read one psalm each day, and look for statements about God’s character and work. Keep a journal. Record your list with references. For each statement about God, write a statement that connects that particular characteristic or work of God to some aspect of your life.
- Read Ephesians 1–3. Record statements of who you are in Christ. Record statements of the character of your God. Record statements of God’s work on your behalf. For each one, write a sentence answering the question, “How should this capture my heart with the love of my God for me?”
- Read the Gospels. Record what you learn of the character of your Savior. Record answers to the question, “How can I live my life today, seeking after Christ and living like Him in His presence and in the presence of others?”
- Read Psalm 73. Write your own psalm to God following the pattern of Psalm 73 (or any of the other psalms that are special to you). Cry out to God in humility. Share your heart with Him. Remind yourself of Who He is and how He works. Connect this to your own life. What should you desire? What should you think? What should you do?

## **REFLECT ON GOD CONTINUALLY**

In the midst of this life’s wilderness, everyone thinks; in the arid regions of the wilderness, thoughts sometimes scream. In these times, we must learn what captivates the thoughts of our brothers and sisters. We must help them not only to give themselves to learning more about their God, but also to

capturing their thoughts with the truth of God that they know and are learning.

### ***Evaluating Meditation***

In order to evaluate, once again, we must be loving, compassionate, and wise listeners. Words both reveal and betray our meditations. We speak out of the thoughts of our hearts. As we listen to our brothers and sisters, we must pay close attention to what they say and to what they do not say. We must listen for words that are in harmony with the actions we observe, and we must listen for words that are discordant with behavior. As we listen, we should consider the thinking of our fellow believers in at least three important areas: their views of God, their views of themselves, and their views of others.

Listening for the View of God. First, we must listen for our brothers' and sisters' views of God. What do they teach us about their views of God by what they say about Him? What do they teach us about their views of Him by the times they leave Him out of their life's stories? When are they tempted to doubt the truth they know about God based on the intensity of their present circumstances?

In order to learn the answers to these questions, we must both listen to and encourage our beloved brothers and sisters to speak openly about the doubts and distractions that capture their thoughts in the wilderness. This takes time. It often feels wrong to speak our hearts' doubts about God openly with others. Yet we must encourage our brothers and sisters to speak with the humble, submissive, frankness of David. We must take them to the words of the Psalms to help them speak their thoughts to God and to us. Notice these verses where the authors of the Psalms expressed their doubts to God.

- Why do You stand afar off, O Lord? Why do You hide in times of trouble? (Ps. 10:1).
- How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, Having sorrow in my heart daily? How long will my enemy be exalted over me? (Ps. 13:1, 2).
- My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, And from the words of My groaning? O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear; And in the night season, and am not silent. (Ps. 22:1, 2).
- Awake! Why do You sleep, O Lord? Arise! Do not cast us off forever. Why do You hide Your face, And forget our affliction and our oppression? For our soul is bowed down to the dust; Our body clings to the ground. (Ps. 44:23–25).
- Lord, why do You cast off my soul? Why do You hide Your face from me? I have been afflicted and ready to die from my youth; I suffer Your terrors; I am distraught. Your fierce wrath has gone over me; Your terrors have cut me off. They came around me all day long like water; They engulfed me

altogether. Loved one and friend You have put far from me, And my acquaintances into darkness (Ps. 88:14–18).

As we look together at the words of these Scriptures, we should ask our brothers and sisters to tell us where they identify with these authors. We should help them give words to their own hearts. In so doing, we will learn what captures their attention, and we will learn where they need to be captivated with truth about God.

We can also evaluate our brothers and sisters' meditations about God by listening to them when they pray. When they talk to God, what do they say about His character? What tone of voice do they use? How does this tone change as the topics of their prayers change? What do they ask God to do with the situation and in the situation? For whom do they pray—themselves and others? Do they pray for their own growth in Christlikeness or only for escape from the difficulty? Where do they exhibit instabilities or vacillations in their prayers? Remember to rejoice in the demonstrations of faith in God, as well as listen for the doubts and distractions that could overwhelm faith.

Listening for the View of Self. As we listen for views of God, we will also hear our brothers' and sisters' views of themselves. Our doubts about God always influence our views of ourselves. God forsakes us. He hides from us. He fails to hear us.

How do the thoughts of God that capture their minds lead our brothers and sisters to make their meditations personal? Where do their wrong views of God lead them to have wrong views concerning themselves? What influence do these meditations hold over them? How do these thoughts provide an interpretive grid for their lives? How can we help them to see themselves more clearly through the lens of God's Word?

Listening for the View of Others. We must also take note of meditations concerning others. Once again, our doubts about God always influence our views of others. Our enemies prosper while we flounder. God hears others, but not us. God fails to defend us against those who seek to harm or even destroy us. Where do our brothers and sisters fail to view others accurately because they fail to view God correctly? How do these views of others influence their decisions and actions? Where are they tempted to jealousy or self-pity as they meditate on their flawed interpretations of others?

As we begin to discern the focal points of our brothers' and sisters' meditations, we must ask ourselves, "What truths about the character and works of God need to seize their attention? Where do we need to help them combat their doubts and distractions with the glorious truth about their God?" As we begin to formulate answers to these questions, we then must seek to communicate God to our brothers and sisters in ways that will capture their thoughts with Him. We must help them rebuild the broken altar of their meditations from the stable stones of God's character and works. We must help them turn the ordinary elements of their world into captivating reminders of God. We must help them



to turn food, birds, arms, and jackals into reminders to them of their God. We must make it our goal to help them turn from their doubts and distractions and instead meditate day and night on their holy God.

## **Encouraging Meditation on God**

As we spend time with our fellow believers, encouraging them to walk faithfully with God, we must look for opportunities to communicate the truth about God's character and works in ways that can captivate their thoughts. In order to do this, we must be students of our brothers and sisters, and we must be students of the metaphors and imagery of the Scriptures.

**Becoming Students of Our Brothers and Sisters.** We must be students of people. We should take a personal interest in the details of the lives of our brothers and sisters. Where did they grow up? What were the sights and sounds of their childhood? Where did they go to college? Where do they work? What are the details of their work responsibilities? What are the sights and sounds on their commute to work? How do they spend their leisure time? What hobbies do they enjoy? What sports do they follow? What places have they visited? What are their likes and dislikes? Keep going and add to the list. If we are to help our brothers and sisters connect the truth about God to their everyday lives, we must know some of the details of their everyday lives.

**Becoming Students of the Metaphors and Imagery in the Scriptures.** We also must be students of the Scriptures—especially students of the metaphors of Scripture. Consider reading through the Psalms and noting the metaphors God uses for Himself. God is a rock, a strong tower, a shepherd, a light. For a period of time in my life, I read one psalm or section of a psalm each day and highlighted all the metaphors for God. This exercise helped me transform my meditation, and it also helped me better use these metaphors in my discipleship of others. Consider reading through the Gospel of John and noting afresh the “I am” statements of Christ—the bread of life, the light of the world, the vine, etc. How can these help us think on our Savior? How can these help us to encourage our brothers and sisters to turn from doubts and distractions and meditate on Christ?

As we become students of our brothers and sisters, of the character of our God, and of the metaphors of Scripture, we should then work to use metaphors in our conversations. When we do, the Spirit of God will use our words to help our fellow believers return in their thoughts to meditate on God's character and work on their behalf. As Mary gives her energy to caring for her son who is dying of cancer, she will be reminded that her God stands watch over her life, always providing what is good for her at just the right time. As Ted faces the opposition of his boss, looking at the clock, hoping for the end of the day, he will be reminded that God's mercies are new with every new day, and God is faithful every second. As Joel lies on his hospital bed and sees the IV providing for him the fluids and medicines his body needs, he will meditate on the truth that his God provides all he needs to respond with faithful trust as he faces each moment's uncertainty. As Mark plants the crop in the spring, grieving over the loss of his son in last fall's harvesting accident, his thoughts will be drawn to his God who will

resurrect Jim's body and reunite them in that day of eternal springtime. As Kathy cries out to God, humbly asking why her mother died in a car accident on the eve of Kathy's wedding, she will also meditate on the fact that her mom is in the presence of her Eternal Bridegroom.

**Meditating Continually on God.** As we continue to assist our brothers and sisters to turn from their doubts and distractions to meditate on their God day and night, we can do this through encouraging them to take on various projects that will help them to reflect on God continually. Here are some suggestions:

- Keep a list of the thoughts that keep fighting for your attention. How do they reflect the doubts and distractions of your heart? What Scriptures draw your attention away from these doubts and distractions to truth about God, yourself, and others?
- Make a photo album of Scriptures, songs, hymns, poems, quotes, etc. that draw your heart to God and away from your doubts and distractions.
- Make a list of God's character and works from the Psalms. Turn it into a think list and a prayer list. Thank God for Who He is and what He does. Do the same with Ephesians or the Gospel of John.
- Write your own psalm. Share your doubts and distractions with God. Remind yourself of the character of your God and His work on your behalf. Make it your prayer to God. Read it to Him when your doubts and distractions scream for your attention.
- Create a playlist of songs and Scripture readings that will help you to meditate on God.
- Develop your own metaphors. What routine elements of your world can you transform into wonderful word pictures and captivating metaphors that direct your attention to the character and works of your God?

## **PRAISE GOD SUBMISSIVELY**

Our words and actions always give praise to someone or something. As we walk beside our brothers and sisters, we have the wonderful privilege of encouraging them to live in praise to God. As we speak to them about the glory of their God, we will encourage them to speak to Him and to others about His glorious nature and acts. As we help them consider how their words and actions express praise to the persons or objects of their trust and meditation, we will help them to consider their conduct and live for new reasons and in new ways, bringing praise to God. As we help them praise God in the midst of the changes that crisis and suffering call on them to make, we will assist them to reorganize their lives with the goal of bringing praise to God in the midst of the new opportunities and limitations.

### ***Evaluating Praise***

Crisis, by its very nature, demands change. Increased temptations usually accompany the arid regions of life. In addition, suffering frequently comes with new limitations that demand significant life adjustments. Evaluating the praise of our brothers and sisters in Christ means that we will take the time to work with them in order to help them see the increased temptations and evaluate the changes that crisis and suffering demand. We can then help them to develop new ways of living that bring glory to God. What will Christlikeness look like in Pam's life as she adjusts to life in a wheelchair after being struck by a drunk driver? How should Tim continue to manifest Christ in his life after his traumatic brain injury? In what ways can Ethan bring praise to his God, even as his body is robbed of function continually and increasingly by the horror of ALS? How can Walt bring praise to his God while he is unemployed and searching for a new job?

**Listening and Asking Careful Questions.** In times of increased suffering and crisis, we must always learn of and consider the temptations, opportunities, and limitations that the new situations bring into the lives of our brothers and sisters. Once again, we must listen and ask thoughtful questions. What did Linda's doctor say to her about how she should expect to feel when she returns to work following back surgery? How does Jacob feel as he sits in the stands watching his teammates finish the season without him, knowing that he will never play football again because of his knee injury? What are the daily trials Mike faces as he seeks to adjust to raising his four young children after the unexpected death of his wife? What seemingly insurmountable challenges is Carol facing as she seeks to live her life without her husband of fifteen years since his death in the service of his country?

**Researching Others in Similar Circumstances.** We can learn about the limitations that our fellow believers face by researching the stories and reading the biographies of others who have faced similar circumstances. We can also learn from those who give their lives to study individuals who suffer from a particular limitation or disease. This research will help us ask informed questions and watch with eyes better trained to anticipate possible limitations and pitfalls. Here we can benefit from the descriptions of suffering and limitations that come to us even from secular authors. We can learn from the descriptions while always reinterpreting the conclusions and analyses through a biblical lens. For example, what does the American Heart Association say about people's responses post heart surgery? What can we learn from the biography of the wife of a husband with traumatic brain injury? How can the Muscular Dystrophy Association help us anticipate what parents might experience as they care for their daughter afflicted by this horrible disease? As we walk beside our brothers and sisters in the midst of the wilderness, we must love them enough to give time to learning from others about their situations.

### ***Encouraging Praise of God***

As we assist our brothers and sisters to make the changes that God is calling them to make in the midst of their sufferings, we must hold before ourselves and them the glorious truth of Hebrews 13:15 and

Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.

**Rejoicing in God's Work in the Lives of Our Fellow Believers.** As we encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ to seek earnestly after their God and to capture their thoughts with truth about their God, the words of praise they speak and their acts of praise should not surprise us. When we hear their words and witness their acts of praise, we should rejoice with them at God's work in their lives. We should point them to the glorious truth that their simple, even at times mundane, words of praise and acts of obedience in the midst of their pain are, in fact, sacrifices of praise that bring glory to God. When Dan greeted his wife's surgeon with a smile and a thank you even though there were some surgical complications, Dan gave a sacrifice of praise to his God. When Pam, dying of cancer herself, called her friend, Brenda, to cry with her and read Scripture with her after Pam learned of Brenda's cancer diagnosis, Pam offered a sacrifice of praise to her God. We must be quick to celebrate these humble sacrifices of praise offered by our brothers and sisters to God.

**Considering the Words and Ways of Our Fellow Believers.** All who suffer face times of uncertainty about how to live in the face of new limitations. During these times, we will humbly and gently help our brothers and sisters to consider their words and their ways. We will hold before them this essential truth—every word we speak and every action of our lives must be done in submission to God and for His glory. We do not speak words of praise and act in obedience to God just so we can receive the benefits of obedience. Otherwise, those benefits will become our new gods and receive the glory from our words and actions. We speak words of praise and act in obedience because God is glorified by this.

As we hold this glorious hope before our brothers and sisters, we will help them connect their words and actions to their meditation. We will help them find words and deeds that bring glory to God, reflecting His attributes and acts. We will encourage them to fulfill the routine responsibilities that are within their ability as acts of praise to God. We will help them in practical ways to answer the question, "How can I reflect the character of my God in this situation, bringing praise to Him?" We will patiently help Janice to see how her life can continue to magnify her God even though she is confined to a wheel chair after being injured in a boating accident. We will spend time talking with Kendra about how she can reflect God's lovingkindness to her coworkers as together they deal with a new abrasive boss. We will help Alex consider the ways his words can reflect confidence in God's justice and mercy as he testifies at the trial of the drunk driver who killed his wife and severely injured him.

**Prizing Routine Obedience as Part of God's Work.** We will help all of our brothers and sisters to prize routine obedience as a part of God's glorious work, helping us to look more and more like members of

His family. Here all of the pursuits of Psalm 63 come to full expression. We turn from our own desires to seek after and thirst for God alone. We give hearts and minds to learning about and meditating on the character and work of our God. We then offer our bodies as living sacrifices, reflecting the character and glory of God in the midst of our pain and suffering.

Praising God Daily. We should help our brothers and sisters engage in activities that will help them praise God with the whole of their lives. Once again, here are some suggestions.

- Read 2 Samuel 14-18. How do David's words and actions bring praise to God as he fled from Absalom into the wilderness? How can you follow in David's footsteps of praise?
- Read the accounts of Christ's crucifixion in the Gospels. How does your Savior bring praise to God? How does this transform your praise in the wilderness based on His work on the cross for you?
- Write out a brief prayer of praise and thanksgiving to God. Seek to use Psalm 63 and other psalms as a pattern for your prayer.
- Where do your conversations with God and others need to change? Make a list of the ways that your conversations should become a better reflection of God. Begin to put your commitments into practice.
- Make a list of the blessings of God in your life. Spend time in prayer each day, thanking God for His blessings.
- What simple responsibilities have you neglected in the wilderness? List two or three and begin to do them again this week as an act of submissive praise to God.
- What acts of love and kindness should you do for others this week? Whom will you serve and how? Plan the person, the act of kindness, and the time.

### **Concluding Thoughts: Fixing Our Eyes on Christ**

Dick sat in his chair looking back at the face of his pastor with great emotion in his voice. "I just can't take it anymore. I have tried and tried, but it is just not working. Debbie is still threatening to leave me every time she gets angry. Pastor, I have asked her forgiveness for my angry outbursts of the past. I have been trying to love her like Christ loved the church. I have sought to respond to angry words and threats with humble, soft words of love. When she has seen sin in my life, I have confessed it and tried to change, even though she confronts me with screaming and nagging. I have tried to help her around the house, but often times just moments after she thanks me for my help, she turns around and demands more. I'm not sure I can take it any more. It's just not working."

Pastor Thune and Dick had met regularly since Dick came to the Lord two years ago. His wife Debbie rejected Christ and continues to reject Christ. At times, she expresses her rejection of Christ in angry

outbursts towards Dick. Pastor Thune looked compassionately at Dick with an ache in his heart for this battered and bruised sheep. He spoke with a gentle, but urgent reply.

“Dick, I want you to see what I have been seeing in your life. In these last months, I have seen Christ at work in you. I have seen you turn from the temptations to seek escape and control and instead seek after God. I have seen you move from fear to trust as you have given yourself to learning more of your glorious God. Dick, I have seen you show the love of Christ to your wife in ways that can only be explained by the grace of God. I know you are weary. I know you are hurting but, Dick, I want you to know that from my perspective, all of this is working in your life. I know Debbie continues to reject Christ and, at times, yell at you, but I also know that you look more like Christ today than you did when we sat crying in my office two years ago. I see His image in you more clearly than I have ever seen it before. Dick, it is working. In the midst of this dark wilderness as you have hungered for God and fixed your thoughts on Him, I have seen you be like Christ before Debbie. I have seen you be like Christ before me. Dick, you look more like a child of God today than you did in the past. His victory on the cross is becoming your victory, as you die daily to self and live for Him.”

The Correct Measure of Success—Growth in Holiness. In this moment of time, Pastor Thune drew Dick’s heart to his Savior and gave him hope to continue to grow in his dependence on God. This hope that Pastor Thune held before Dick carried a beauty and glory even the psalmist David did not know. As believers after the cross, we stand in a privileged position. Christ Himself transformed the very nature of suffering. In Him, we still suffer, but now in our suffering, we share in His suffering and grow to reflect His image and glory as we grow in our dependence on Him.

Christ’s suffering demonstrated His holiness; our suffering, endured with dependence on Him, results in our growth in holiness (Heb. 5:1-10). In suffering, Christ calls us brothers. He walks with us side by side on the path of suffering. We share a common suffering with His brothers and sisters—our brothers and sisters—as we journey through the wilderness (Heb. 2:5-8). His absolute victory over the temptations which are always present in the wilderness qualified Him to be our tender, compassionate, Great High Priest. We no longer must approach God, as David did, through a sinful high priest on the basis of the temporary covering of bulls and goats. But, on the basis of Christ’s perfect sacrifice, the creator God—our God—invites us—His children—to come into His very presence with confidence, knowing He will respond graciously and mercifully with help at just the right time (Heb. 4:11-16). Coming before Him, following Him, and depending on Him always work because, even though our circumstances and the circumstances of our fellow believers may not improve and at times may worsen, together we will always grow to be more like Him when we seek Him alone, capture our thoughts with thoughts of Him, and live our lives as sacrifices of praise to Him.

Finally, Christ’s victory assures us of certain and final victory. Through faith, we share in His victory over the wilderness (1 Cor. 15:1-58). He is remaking us into His image (Rom. 8:18-30). As we

encourage our brothers and sisters to glance back across their wilderness paths, they will see the progress that time walking with Him has produced in them. His Spirit dwells within them and us—the guarantee of our eternal abundant life with Him (Eph. 1:13, 14). Even in His discipline, He reminds them and us of His loyal love for us. He is our faithful Father, loving us enough to pursue us until we find ourselves safely at the end of our wilderness journey—in His presence forever (Heb. 12:1-11). Until then, we must give ourselves to Him and to His people, helping His people walk the path of suffering in the arid regions of this life’s wilderness, . . .

. . . seeking only Him;

. . . meditating on Him;

. . . and living lives of sacrificial words and acts of praise offered humbly before Him.

## **Dr. Jeff Newman**

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*Dr. Jeff Newman leads Baptist Mid-Missions’ Safe Haven for Missionary Soul Care. In this role, Jeff and his wife, Sherry, purpose to care deeply for the souls of Baptist Mid-Missions missionaries, promoting spiritual strength and fruitfulness and enabling them to achieve optimal effectiveness over a lifetime of ministry.*

*Before joining BMM, Jeff served for over three decades at Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary. Over twenty of those years, he taught Biblical counseling and served area churches by providing Biblical counseling. In addition to his ministry with BMM, Jeff also teaches adjunct for FBTS. Jeff earned his undergraduate and master’s degrees at Faith and a D.Min. in Biblical Counseling from Westminster Theological Seminary-Philadelphia. Jeff and Sherry have two married adult children and four grandchildren.*