

Growing as a Follower of Jesus in Challenging Times
Growing UP in Our Relationship with Jesus
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The title of the sermon series we began last week, “Growing as a Follower of Jesus in Challenging Times,” describes our goal for this series. In a time when we haven’t been able to meet publicly for worship, we want to reinforce the truth that you and I can grow as followers of Jesus in difficult times...even when we aren’t able to meet publicly for worship.

Admittedly, the landscape surrounding the coronavirus has changed since we planned this series a month or so ago—our county has moved to “green”, even now churches around us are beginning to re-gather for public worship and in all likelihood within the next month, McBIC also will begin gathering for public worship. But this is an important topic for us whether we’re meeting together for worship or not.

While none of us enjoy hard times, the Bible consistently teaches that it’s often during challenging times that we grow the most. At the beginning of his letter to 1st Century Jewish Christians James, Jesus’ brother, writes these words,

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. James 1:2-4

When we walk through them well challenging times teach us to persevere, they strengthen our faith, they develop our character and they help us mature.

I confess that while I’m aware that we as individuals and as a church can grow during hard times, my focus during the coronavirus has often been on helping us get through this time, rather than thinking a lot about how this time can help us grow. Last month I was meeting with my executive coach—a man from California who is a friend and ministry colleague of our bishop—who I’ve been meeting with twice a month via Zoom since last September. During one of our May meetings Buck asked the questions, “*How can your church move forward during this coronavirus season?*” “*What is God doing in your church that will better position you for effective ministry in the future?*” Those are great questions and they’ve helped shift my focus from “just making it through” to “growing healthier and stronger.”

And I have seen McBIC strengthened during this season—we've established a stronger on-line presence and learned a lot about on-line ministry; we've seen our partnership with community churches strengthened as we've collaborated together to collect food for students and families in need in our community and as we've addressed our response to COVID-19 and to systemic racism; our staff has grown as we've learned to partner together remotely and as we've been learning a lot about change and leadership in challenging times; this season has helped us determine what most important for us as a staff and as a church family; and, I think this time has reinforced for our staff and our church family, the importance of prayer.

When I'm faced with complexity, my response is to try and make things as simple as possible, and so as I thought about helping us wrap our minds and hearts around growing during challenging times I was reminded of UP/IN/OUT—a framework that boils discipleship down to its essence. At its core discipleship is about growing UP in relationship with God; growing IN community with other believers; and, growing OUT in service and outreach to those who don't know Jesus. We'll be looking at UP, IN and OUT over the next three weeks and today we begin with growing UP in our relationship with Jesus.

I'm team-preaching this message with Susan today, because she's an important voice for us on the subject of growing UP in relationship with God. Susan is McBIC's Associate Pastor and some of her responsibilities in that role include overseeing groups at McBIC and giving leadership to our church's prayer ministry. As a staff member, Susan has helped me grow in my relationship with Jesus, both through insights she gives me, challenges she extends and the way she models growing in her own relationship with Jesus.

Susan, what do you have for us as we explore growing UP in our relationship with Jesus?

As you might imagine, the past 3 & ½ months have been filled with leadership challenges for our staff. I've been a pastor for over 29 years, and I'm confident this has been the most challenging season I've faced as a pastor—moving to on-line services in the absence of being able to meet physically, working remotely as a staff, providing care and counseling and meeting people needs electronically, processing various issues related to re-opening and over the last several weeks, addressing the systemic racism and unrest in our nation. It's been a

season where I've been reminded often of my need to continue growing in my relationship with God and in my reliance upon Him and his wisdom and strength.

Near the beginning of the coronavirus crisis John King shared Acts chapter 20 verse 28 with our staff: *"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."* As a pastor, I'm committed to prayer and providing spiritual leadership for our church family, but that verse was a good reminder to me of my responsibility as your pastor. Around that same time Cody Sherry shared that he was having a conversation with his dad and he was talking with him about how he was limited in what he could do in light of the stay at home order. His dad said something like, "Well, I'd expect pastors to pray during this time." I've thought about Mr. Sherry's comments repeatedly over the past several months.

And several weeks ago, during a staff meeting when our staff was wrestling with our next steps related to re-gathering for worship, we were collectively feeling the weight of the decisions we needed to make and all the uncertainty and the constantly changing data and guidelines, Katy Pratt spoke about 2 Chronicles chapter 20. King Jehoshaphat, the King of Israel, was crying out to God because his people were on the verge of being attacked by a coalition of Moabites and Ammonites. His army was severely out-numbered and he cried out to God in prayer with these words, *"We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you."* That prayer resonated with me and our staff and I'm guessing many of you could claim that prayer as well sometime or multiple times over the past 3+ months. It's a powerful prayer of vulnerability, honesty and humility. And God answered King Jehoshaphat's prayer. God said, *"Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's."* Again, how timely is that for us at this time and over the past several months. Don't be afraid or discouraged. And the battle isn't yours, but God's. You can read more details about the story in 2 Chronicles 20, but God delivered Jehoshaphat and his people—they were at peace and He gave them rest on every side.

I share these examples with you, because of the reminders they served for me of my dependence on God and my need to constantly be growing in my relationship with Him. At a head level, I know my relationship with God is central and yet it's so easy amidst everything else

to lose sight of that priority. I'm sure you find that to be true as well. In the midst of pressing family responsibilities, work challenges, financial concerns and other important aspects of life, it's easy to lose sight of the priority our relationship with God holds. It's easy, like King Jehoshaphat, to be preoccupied with worry and anxiety. My hope for myself and for each of you is that no matter how challenging things are we're able to turn to God and say, "*We don't know what to do, but our eyes are on you.*" And honestly, that's not a bad prayer to pray every day, because that's our ongoing reality. And God's response gives us the perspective we desperately need—"*Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the battle is not yours, but God's.*" My prayer is that we make our confession to God and as He responds with his word of encouragement, we like Jehoshaphat will be at peace and that God will give us rest on every side.