

What God Has Done
“Trading Religion for Relationship”
Isaiah 64:6 and Philippians 3:7-9
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October 2, 2022

Two months ago, after returning to McBIC from a couple of ministry trips and some vacation time, I was praying and thinking about our fall preaching schedule. We were wrapping up our summer series on Romans and I knew that in September we’d be preaching the series, “Living as Exiles.” As I was praying about October and November, I had a sense we needed to focus on spiritual renewal. As I thought about renewal, God brought to my mind the power stories have to remind us of what God has done in our lives and in the lives of others. Over the next several weeks the idea of having members of our pastoral staff share their stories began to crystallize, and our staff helped me to refine and shape this series. Today I’m preaching the first message in our sermon series, *“What God Has Done.”*

My hope for this series is that as you listen to the stories of how God has worked in the lives of our staff, you’ll be inspired and encouraged. You’ll remember what God has done in your life and you’ll move forward with greater hope and resolve knowing that God wants to continue working in your life to bring about his transformation.

Personal stories have power! I recently came across a quote by a blogger named David Horner. Speaking about our tendency to forget our stories, Horner wrote, *“To forget our story is to forget who we are and why we’re here.”* That’s so true. Our quickness to forget is why remembering is such a prominent theme in Scripture. God’s people are always in danger of spiritual amnesia—forgetting who we are, forgetting who God is and forgetting what He has done in our lives. Knowing our tendency to forget, God impressed on Moses the importance of helping the Israelites remember all God had done for them as they entered the Promised Land. In Deuteronomy chapter 4 we read that the Israelites were preparing to cross the Jordan River, the boundary between the wilderness in which God’s people had wandered for 40 years, and their new home. As God’s people stood on the cusp of entering their long-anticipated home Moses passionately pleaded with the Israelites to remember and not forget...

Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. Remember the day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, when he said to me, “Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children.” – Deuteronomy 4:9–10

Just a few chapters later in Deuteronomy chapter 8 Moses reiterated the importance of God’s people remembering and not forgetting. Moses said,

When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

“You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today. – Deuteronomy 8:10–14; 17–18

Stories remind us of who we are, they reinforce who God is and they keep us from forgetting what God has done in our lives. It’s against the backdrop of remembering all God has done that members of our pastoral staff will share their stories over the next two months. You know us, and there are aspects of our stories you may find intriguing, but our intent isn’t to put ourselves forward and say, “*Hey, look at us. Aren’t we great?*” We want to highlight the goodness and greatness of God, through sharing with you what He has done in our lives. As you listen to our stories, my hope is that at points they’ll intersect with your story, and that God will use insights you gain from us to revitalize and renew your own relationship with Jesus.

As I begin to share my story, I have a question I’d like you to respond to if you feel comfortable doing so. “*How many of you would say you were raised in a legalistic church environment where rule-keeping was emphasized?*” I suspected many of us would answer that question affirmatively. I asked the question, because I can’t share my spiritual journey with you apart from considering the impact legalism and striving to keep rules had on me. What constituted appropriate and inappropriate behavior for a Christian was instilled in me from as far back as I can remember. Christians, in my understanding didn’t smoke, drink, chew, use bad

language or engage in sex outside of marriage. Christians did attend church regularly, pray and read their Bibles, treat people fairly and live with integrity.

I was a compliant child and teen, so I didn't find the list of do's and don'ts oppressive. It was all I knew and in the environment in which I was raised, it didn't seem hard to do what I was supposed to do while avoiding the things I wasn't to do. However, looking back there were at least two negatives ingrained in me. First, I became very judgmental of others who didn't live the way I thought Christians were supposed to, and I got used to comparing myself with others... a comparison that often led me to feel good about myself and critical of others. Secondly, my focus on rules made me insecure and uncertain about my standing with God. I was so conscious of doing wrong and God's desire for me to do right that I constantly questioned whether I was going to go to heaven if I died or Jesus returned. If I didn't immediately fall asleep when I went to bed, I would typically pray a prayer asking God to forgive me of all the sins I'd committed that day, so I would know I was right with God. Those prayers were my spiritual insurance policy. My fixation on keeping rules and striving to do right kept me from understanding that God loved me deeply and unconditionally and desired me to focus my energy on my relationship with Him.

That may sound like a difficult way to live, but it was all I knew, and I was relatively happy. I was the classic "good kid." Other than quarreling with my siblings, I did what my parents expected of me. I was a pretty good student at school, and I was involved in leadership roles in my church. I went to Messiah College as a history major, thinking that I might teach high school history when I graduated, but during my first year at Messiah I sensed God calling me to be a pastor. Several months after I switched majors—during the summer of 1985—a new senior pastor named Ken Hepner came to McBIC.

Ken was unlike any pastor I had ever met before. He was in his early 30s, had longer hair than any pastor I knew and had only been a Christian for 10 years after being delivered from an addiction to drugs. Ken loved Jesus passionately and was committed to seeing our church become a community church that focused on discipling believers and helping those who didn't know Christ come into a relationship with Him. Ken began to invest in me, and invited me into a discipleship ministry called, "Timothy Ministry," where I was discipled by Jim Hess.

I've titled my story "Trading Religion for Relationship with Jesus" because Pastor Ken began to help me see that what Jesus wanted was a relationship with me, not my pursuit of religion characterized by rituals and rule-keeping. As I observed Ken's life and listened to his preaching and teaching, I was attracted to the vibrancy of his faith. Ken was serious about purity and holy living, but his primary focus was on his relationship with Jesus, not on keeping rules. The way he prayed and talked and lived showed me he viewed God as a father, Jesus as a friend and the Holy Spirit as his counselor, rather than seeing God as a demanding task master he needed to please. Ken's view of God and his relationship with Jesus caught my attention, but at that time I didn't have the framework to fully understand what I was observing.

The transformation God used Pastor Ken to begin in my life continued as I graduated from Messiah and headed off to seminary in a little town just South of Lexington, Kentucky, called Wilmore. Beyond agreeing to room with a second-year student I had played basketball with at Messiah, I had no idea what I was getting into at seminary. I think I kind of envisioned seminary as some sort of monastery where all the students would be hyper-spiritual, but not very cool... like I was. 😊 Instead, I learned that over half of the guys on my dorm floor had played college sports. We had great conversations about God, sports and girls... not necessarily in that order. I enjoyed my classes, the social life at seminary and at Asbury College, and intramural sports. However, very quickly I found myself confronted by a spiritual conundrum. (If you're not familiar with that word, a conundrum is a "*confusing and difficult problem or a riddle.*") Here was the situation I encountered: some of the guys and girls at seminary went to clubs where they danced and drank alcohol, and others used what I considered inappropriate language. Now, if that entirely summed up their behavior, I could have written them off as pretend, wanna-be Christians, who weren't serious about their faith. But this was my conundrum: some of those same people who danced at clubs and drank alcohol, were closer in their relationship with Jesus than I was. For me, that created cognitive dissonance, and God used that unsettledness to chip away at my belief that his love for me was conditional—dependent on what I did and didn't do.

A month after graduating from seminary I started in my new role as McBIC's youth pastor. I continued to learn about the priority of relationship with God over religion from Pastor

Ken and members of McBIC's pastoral staff. In addition to watching how Ken lived his life and conversations I had with Pastors Dave Barnett and Doris Barr, I read books that impacted me, like "Abba's Child" and "Ragamuffin Gospel" by Brennan Manning. At the same time, I received a crash course on the brokenness in so many people's lives. As a youth pastor I became aware of the pain in people's lives—especially teens—to a degree I'd never encountered. Drug & alcohol abuse, sexual promiscuity and depression were prevalent in the lives of many students. As I processed the brokenness all around me, I came to a new understanding that it was only by God's grace that I had been spared from much of that pain. I began to tune into the incredible grace God had poured into my life allowing me to be raised in a family that loved me and taught me about Jesus and being part of a church where Jesus was preached and where I had the opportunity to be mentored by pastor colleagues I greatly respected.

In the process of ministering to hurting teens and interacting with our pastoral staff I came to a fresh realization that while I knew in my head that God loved me, I lived my life as if God's love was dependent on what I did or didn't do. I walked through Healing Prayer Ministry with Pastor Ken and Pastor Dave Barnett and was able to replace lies I believed about God's conditional love and my need to strive to please Him, with the truth that God's love for me was unconditional. I began seeking to live well and do right, not out of a desire to gain God's favor, but out of my love and appreciation for Him and for all He had done and was continuing to do in my life. During that season Greta and I were married, and her love reinforced for me the nature of God's love and she supported me in my ongoing journey of having my mind and heart transformed. Looking back, I recognize that I was in the process of trading religion for relationship with Jesus—a process that continues to this day, and which will continue as long as I live. Even though I know in my mind that God isn't interested in my attempts to earn his love, I still find myself trying to impress Him at times with how good I am and how lucky He is to have me on his side. The prophet Isaiah's words in Isaiah 64:6 remind me how futile my attempts to earn righteousness are and how God really views my attempts to do good:

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. — Isaiah 64:6

As I read the New Testament, I can identify with the Apostle Paul—a man whose father was a Pharisee and who was identified at a young age as a rising star in Judaism. Paul describes himself as a “Pharisee among Pharisees.” He was a “dyed in the wool” legalist and as far as anyone could tell he was thriving, but then on the way to Damascus to arrest and execute members of this new sect called “The Way,” he encountered Jesus, and his life was never the same. I resonate with Paul’s statement in Philippians chapter 3:

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.
– Philippians 3:7–9

Paul doesn’t use the same language, but to me those verses scream, “trading religion for relationship with Jesus.” Legalism—doing stuff to gain God’s favor—can’t coexist with grace—receiving God’s undeserved favor. Shifting from legalism to grace was reinforced for me as I developed personal relationships with members of McBIC’s recovery community—particularly a man named Steve Myers. Amidst his recovery journey Steve showed up at McBIC and then I ran into him at the Mechanicsburg Pool. Steve and I became friends—he was part of a small group men’s Bible study I led; for several years we met monthly for breakfast; and, we had several opportunities to minister together. At one point, early in our relationship Steve invited me to a Narcotics Anonymous Meeting where he was celebrating 5 or 10 years of sobriety. The meeting deeply impacted me, because it once again highlighted for me how I didn’t deserve God’s grace any more than the men or women at that NA Meeting, many of whom grew up in horrible family situations and seemingly had little choice but to walk the broken path they walked.

Attending that NA Meeting and learning to know Steve and friends of his who were moving toward Jesus while they battled addiction and sought to overcome the toxic family situations in which they’d been raised, further cemented my understanding of how God’s grace had been and continued to be, poured out on me. I’m learning more about God’s grace all the time, and yet striving to please God through what I do, and judging others based on my standard of what a “good Christian” should look like is something I struggle with to this day. I’m

not sure legalism ever fully dies, but I'm thankful that I'm growing in my understanding of God's grace for me and others.

Earlier, I asked *"How many of you would say, you were raised in a legalistic church environment where rule-keeping was emphasized?"* I asked that question to help you tune into my story and to prepare your heart for God to speak to you. A number of you raised your hands in response to that question, but I hope you understand that you don't have to have been raised in a Christian home for legalism to be your struggle. Legalism is prevalent among Christians, but it's also at the root of the sense many people have that pleasing God and getting to heaven is about doing more good than bad—as if God has some cosmic scale that weighs all we do in our lives to determine whether we go up to heaven or down to hell.

Whatever your background might be, I encourage you today to trade religion for relationship with God—what you can do to impress or please God for the grace that He wants to extend to you. Perhaps you identify to the lyrics of this song sung by Lauren Daigle that have connected with me over the past number of months and as I thought about today's sermon...

"Losing My Religion" by Lauren Daigle

I've been an actor on the stage playing a role I have to play
I'm getting tired, it's safe to say living behind a masquerade

No more performing out of fear I'm trying to keep my conscience clear
It all seems so insincere I'd trade it all to meet You here

I'm losing my religion

Light a match and watch it burn to Your heart I will return
No one can love me like You do so why would I want a substitute

I'm losing my religion To find You

I'm losing my religion and finding something new
Cause I need something different and different looks like You

As we sing our song of response, I encourage you to quiet your heart and listen for the Holy Spirit's direction. What is God speaking to you? Is He asking you to confess to Him your pursuit of religion and embrace his grace? Is there work He desires to do in your heart to help you move beyond striving to please Him, so you can receive his unconditional love for you as his

beloved daughter or son? Receive these words of truth from Romans 5:8, *“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*