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Title: *Reflections*

Scripture: Matthew 16:21-26

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Well, good morning and welcome to Orchard Hill. It's really great to be here. And I think I said this last week, but I want to say it again. Thank you to all of you for your prayers for me over the last seven weeks. Thank you for the cards, the notes of encouragement, and the kindnesses extended to me and to our family. We have felt the presence of God in unmistakable ways and the prayers of so many of you, his people, for us during this time.

And if you're a guest here today, I'm going to do something that's a little different. Normally during this time, we teach consecutively through books of the Bible or passages of the Bible. Some people would call it exposition. And what that means is you let the text kind of set what you talk about. So, for example, this year we started in First Corinthians and we went through about the whole first half of the book up until the end of June, and we'll come back to that in the fall.

And today, what I'm going to do instead is share a little bit about my experience and then use a text to bring some perspective to it. Some people would call that more of a topical approach. When I was in grad school seminary, one of the professors I had, Walter Kaiser, who was a renowned Old Testament professor and author, used to say, when you teach, if you teach topically, do it once every five years and immediately repent.

It was what he would say. So, I'm not going to say this is my once every five years. But please indulge me for a little bit here today because I know that when you walk through something as a pastor, you do journey publicly. And so, I want to share not so much what happened to me physically, but as much as how it impacted me spiritually during this time as well.

So let me pray. Father, thank you for those who are gathered today in Wexford, in the Chapel, those in the Strip District, Butler, Southpointe, and online. God, I pray today that you would speak, that my words would reflect your word in content, tone, and emphasis. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So, seven weeks ago today, Memorial Day weekend, I was on a roof, a little metal roof, and I was using a blower. I was blowing some debris off and cleaning out the gutters, and it was about 14 feet from the bottom of the roof line to the ground. I was standing above it a little bit using the blower. So maybe 16 to 18 feet above ground.

And I caught a little bit of water with my foot and it was a little bit like ice. I slipped. I fell, and I went flying to the ground. I did manage to reach back. I grabbed the eaves trough and ripped it away a little bit from there. But the fortunate thing about that was that it allowed me to flip, and I landed flat on my left side, which was fortunate in many ways because when you fall that far, you could easily break a neck, and be paralyzed.

You land another way, and you could shatter a leg and never really have full use of the leg or good use of the leg. Land on your back. That's not a good thing. Land on your stomach. That's not a good thing. So, I landed flat on my left side. Beyond that, I wasn't able to get my arm out. Normally, your reflex is to get your arm out, and if you get your arm out, you probably break a wrist, elbow, or shatter some things in your arm.

And so, I landed and probably said some things I don't want to repeat here. And my wife was there, my boys, some of their friends, and my wife came out, the kids came around, and my wife started to cry a little. She later told me it was because she saw me in pain. I thought it was because she was going to have to deal with the insurance.

We ended up going to the hospital, and I couldn't walk right then. And I said right away, it's my shoulder and my pelvis. I could move my feet and hands right away so we were fairly confident that I wasn't paralyzed in any way. And so then your concern becomes internal bleeding.

So, it becomes how quickly can we get to the hospital? We determined that between the insurance and speed, it would be quicker just to get me in the car, and get to the hospital. And I do what, you know, most people do. You're sitting there in the car. I started Googling falls from that height. And what I came to realize, at least according to some statistics, is that any fall from that height and under accounts for 40% of fall deaths. It was like, wow, that's something.

We get to the hospital, and my son Ben is with my wife and me as we get to the hospital. And he brings a wheelchair there. And when I went to stand up, I fainted from the pain, evidently. Which, hot tip, that's a way to avoid the wait at the hospital. And so, I got in right away to the hospital room and they did the full body scan and very quickly were able to say there's no internal bleeding. So that's good news.

I wasn't able to walk. And what ended up happening was that I broke my scapula and my pelvis in four places. And so, I've been without walking basically since then until the crutches just last week. I had about six weeks in a wheelchair, about three weeks

of really not being able to do much, saw the beauty of my wife's care for me and my four boys, and their care for me and so many others.

And like literally, I couldn't get off the sofa without help. I couldn't do things without help. And as I met with the doctors, what I heard very quickly was your pelvis is going to heal from the four fractures, probably without surgery. Your muscles and ligaments are holding it in place. So right now, my prognosis from this is that I will walk again in August, and I'll be able to do whatever I was doing before in September, which I feel is just a miraculous thing from God.

And there's a piece of me that hesitates to say that. And here's why I hesitate to say that. I've sat with enough of you over the years that I know that not every fall ends this way. And not only that, I know that it isn't just falls. There are other things that happen and you go why didn't God do a miracle for me?

And even if you could say, wow, God was really gracious in how He preserved you through the fall, there's at least a question of if God's so great, why did He let you fall in the first place? And I know that those are the kinds of questions that we ask when this happens. And so let me just share with you an even bigger part of this story for me.

So, while we were in the hospital that night seven weeks ago when the doctor came in to tell us about the internal scan, she said, but you also have several enlarged lymph nodes that appear down in your chest cavity, and they are along the esophagus and in the lungs. And it doesn't take Googling to understand that's not a good thing.

And so, we ended up meeting with an oncologist in the days that followed. I asked the oncologist, I said, you know, we're going to do a lot of research on this. So, I said, please tell us what is normal. Tell us the outer ends of what this could be.

And what he said was basically this has the hallmarks of lymphoma. The worst case would be esophageal cancer. Esophageal cancer is a really bad cancer. It generally means a 20% survival rate over five years. And then the good side of it would be you don't have cancer and something else is causing this. But I've been around a lot. This has the signs of some kind of lymphoma.

So, while I'm in the hospital, unable to move, we're processing this possibility. And we're living kind of with the cloud of what could this be? We also met with a thoracic surgeon who was a little more hopeful and said, you know, this could be a lot of

things. Obviously, it could be that and we need to do the biopsy in order to really know. But you're in no shape for a biopsy right now. I was on a blood thinner and my body was beaten, so the biopsy needed to be pushed down the road.

Now, the reason that I talk about this today isn't just to give you my story, but I also want to share a little bit about the spiritual journey of this because I know that many of us at different times have either faced that kind of news or that kind of possibility. Maybe it isn't a health thing like that, but you've had an accident, you've had a financial hardship, you've had a relationship that got shattered when you didn't want it to be shattered, or you've had a career thing blow up on you. And the question, at least in part, is, okay, God, where are you in this? What's going on?

As the weeks went by, I started to work on what I would say when I came back. The way I start is I still write my talks on paper by and large, and they all get reduced to a little card. I think better that way than I do on the computer. And so that's how I do it. And I had written down kind of the start of the story, and then I had two arrows coming out of the story. If I get a good result, and if I get a bad result. And then I was going to write two different talks so that I was ready to talk on either side.

And as I showed that and talked about it with my wife, she said, you should write one talk that's true for whatever happens. And in the days that followed, I came across the scripture you heard read as I was just reading through the Book of Matthew, part of just my Bible reading discipline. And here's what we read again.

Verse 21 of Matthew 16. It says, "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

And the way that reads in the original language is you're not thinking the thoughts of God, you're thinking the thoughts of people. And so, what we see here is that there are two paths when we're faced with some kind of suffering, either ours or somebody we love, human thinking or divine thinking. And so here are at least two components of human thinking.

The first is what Peter expresses right here, where he basically has this idea that says bad things don't happen to those who love God and to those who God loves. That's what he's saying. Bad things can't happen to somebody if you love God or if God

loves you. But notice why that can't be true. Because it was Jesus who was God who went to suffer. It was Jesus who is clearly loved by God, clearly loves God, who suffered.

And so, the answer to why we suffer can't be that God doesn't love me or I don't love God enough, or I haven't been obedient enough or I haven't done enough. And so often what happens when we suffer something is we want to turn and say, well, maybe if I had obeyed a little more, then I wouldn't be in this situation. Maybe if I had loved God more, then I wouldn't be in this situation. Or we say, I have obeyed, I have loved, and yet this happened to me. God, why did this happen to me? Because I didn't deserve it.

When divine thinking in many ways is to understand the whole scope of the Bible, that we live in a fallen world and that sometimes bad things happen, and it isn't a reflection of God's love or lack of love for us when things happen that we don't like.

In fact, this was Jesus' point. It's told in Luke 13 where some people came and asked them. They said, hey, what do you make of this tower that fell on these people? And Jesus basically said you think that they're more guilty than anybody else. I tell you now, you said this tower fell so that you would learn to repent.

And what Jesus was doing, at least in part, was he was saying, I want you to know that when bad things happen in this life, it isn't just that they're random bad events, but they point you to something greater in some ways. They point you to the gospel. And this really leads to the second error of human thinking.

And these are verses 24 and following. Notice the context. He's just had this exchange with Peter. He just said, get behind me, you're a stumbling block. And he says this, "Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

We often talk about this out of context when we quote these verses, and we'll say things like, you got to lay down your life, but what was Jesus doing? He was saying, when you experience hardship, when you go through something that's difficult, what it often does is it helps you to see and prioritize eternal things, things that matter.

You see, we tend to think that bad things are bad. That's human thinking. And what Jesus does here is he says, when you have a bad thing happen, if it helps you to release some of the things that you're holding onto in this life and look beyond this life, whether it be ultimately for salvation to say there's a God who has given his life in Jesus Christ so that I can have eternal life, we say this world is not my whole being, it is not my home, but I was created for another, then that can be a good thing.

And even if you believe that and you have a bad thing, it helps you to say my life won't be defined by my diagnosis or my accident or by the relationship that was broken, or by my financial hardship, or by the choices that my kids seem to be making or not making, or by whatever it is. Then all of a sudden, we're freed in some substantial ways to say this life is not intended to hold everything you see, human thinking, in a sense, is a kind of thinking that says my life should be good as I define good. And if God doesn't give me that good life, then God is somehow absent.

Whereas divine thinking is saying in essence, I live in a fallen world and whether or not I experience hardship is not an indication of God's love or indifference of God's goodness or God's capriciousness.

Jonathan Edwards, an old Puritan pastor, had a message that he gave on Romans 8:28. Romans 8:28 is one of those well-known verses. It says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." And here's what Jonathan Edwards said about this. His three points were this. Our bad things will turn out for our good. Our good things can never be taken from us. And our best things are yet to come.

If Jesus Christ is your savior, then you can say my bad things will turn out for good. My good things can never be taken from me. And my best things are yet to come, whatever is happening. So, I've lived with this cloud. My wife and I have lived with this cloud. I was able to get a biopsy toward the end of June. I had great medical care here from the medical community. Several of the doctors of which are part of this church family. And I'm so grateful for it.

The biopsy took place. We had the pathologist in for the biopsy, and he came and told my wife right away that he didn't see cancer at that moment, but it had to go out for the pathology report, and then he came and told me the same thing. And then when the pathology report came back, it didn't show cancer. And so, we were thankful. Now, having enlarged lymph nodes is still a problem. And so, we're thankful that we're going to be able to monitor it, address it, and hopefully deal with what's causing that. But overall, this is a really good outcome.

But here's what I want to say. I know some of you are saying, well, that's nice. You had a good outcome. I didn't have a good outcome. I didn't have what happened to you, happen to me, or to my loved one. But what I want to encourage you to understand is that divine thinking goes past saying that if I love God or God loves me, then bad things can't happen, and bad necessarily equals bad. But instead to have a divine mindset, divine thinking that's able to say there is a God who is good, and if I'm his child, then I live in a fallen world, and God can take what appears to be bad and use it in ways that are ultimately for my good.

I'm hopeful for the track I'm on that if things continue to go as they will, I'll walk soon, get back to normal activity, and be able to address this. But over the last several weeks, I had time to just say, are the things that I believe real about God? And that's the moment that we all get when we're confronted with our own journey and our own hardships.

I'd like to take a moment and pray. Would you join me in prayer? Bow your heads, close your eyes, and if you're comfortable, maybe even just open your hands just as a physical display of saying, God, I release whatever I'm holding, on to you today. Father, we come to you today, and I don't know what's represented in this room, in Butler, the Strip District, Chapel, and the online people who are viewing, but God, I pray today that you would bring healing where there is physical hardship.

But God, even more than that, I pray you'd bring a divine mindset so that we'd be able to not have twice the hurt by having the hurt of our pain, but also the hurt of saying God, where are you? God, I pray for those who right now are experiencing relational hardship, maybe an unwanted break-up or an unwanted kind of estrangement from a family member, loved one, or a working relationship.

God, I pray you'd bring restoration, but even more, I pray that you would bring a mindset that can see your goodness, even in the hardship. God, for those who've wanted pregnancies and not been able to have them, for those who've suffered losses, for those who have seen their kids make choices that they wouldn't have made, for those who've suffered with depression, anxiety, or some kind of of a mental challenge, I pray your healing good hand.

But God, even more, I pray that there would be an understanding of just your goodness and the ability to apply it to where we live. So, Father, we pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Thanks for being here. Have a great week.