

During the Thanksgiving holiday Jane reminded me that thirty-one years ago on Thanksgiving Eve, we got engaged. On the wall of our home, we have a picture of us sitting on her Aunt and Uncle's couch in Evanston, Illinois after I gave Jane her diamond. It's a night neither of us will ever forget (though typical male, I did forget that it'd been 31 years ago).

Previously, Jane and I had talked about marriage. She was certain that I was going to give her a diamond at Christmas; I've never liked being predictable. We were going to spend Thanksgiving together at her Aunt and Uncle's home in Evanston. Unbeknownst to her, I'd driven over from Detroit to her parents' home in East Lansing earlier that week and asked her Dad for permission to ask Jane to marry me. I'd already purchased the ring and then I made the trip to Chicago.

At the time, Jane was teaching 2nd grade at a Christian school in Schaumburg. We went out to dinner and I was very, very nervous. Jane noticed that I wasn't hungry, an unusual situation for me. After dinner we went to downtown Chicago and went for a ride in a horse drawn carriage down Michigan Avenue. While riding along, I asked her again if she'd marry me. But I had the ring stashed in my sport coat pocket. It was a cold night so I was wearing an overcoat too. I reached back for the ring and Jane romantically said to me, (as I'm trying to get the ring from my coat pocket underneath my winter coat), "Do you have an itch?" Well, yes, I do. When I finally secured the ring, she said, "Yes" and the rest is history.

We went to her Aunt and Uncle's home. Everyone is excited and they're snapping pictures of us and Jane's diamond. It was a big celebration. Yet, I remember being very excited yet feeling a bit unsettled at the same time. This was only the first step of a major journey and a huge responsibility.

As we come to this Celebration Sunday, many of you have worked very, very hard to get us here. You've prayed and had a few sleepless nights. You've committed to give more than you're certain you can and you're feeling a little nervous. Maybe you're wondering if you're going to be able fulfill your commitment. Maybe you really want it to be more but you're just not sure how you can do that. Probably, you're wondering what's next. Perhaps you're feeling a bit like I was that night Jane and I got engaged, very excited yet a bit unsettled at the same time.

It's a **We're here, now what?** moment. My Bible is open to Hebrews 11:6, "*And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him.*" This is an exciting day and the best is yet to come. As we celebrate today, can I just share with you some simple biblical thoughts that I believe apply to where we are at today? First, a word of caution....

1. Three Wrong Responses that we need to be aware of. It would be very tempting and our Enemy would love us to have these **three wrong responses**. What are some dangers that we might face in our rejoicing over what God has and is doing here at Grace?

* ***It would be tempting to think that we did it.*** That this is our doing. It's not. Ask those on our **Building Changed Lives Together** committee. From day one...we weren't certain that we'd get here.

* ***We could make the mistake of those who teach Prosperity Theology.*** This heresy teaches that signs of God's blessing are financial and material. They're not. One of the fastest growing economies in the world is Communist China. They're the world's biggest exporter. Financial prosperity is not necessarily a sign of God's blessing. It's certainly not a sign of God blessing an atheistic country where Christians are imprisoned for sharing the Gospel.

* ***Now, we can relax.*** This is probably the most tempting. We've worked hard. The hours and energy that have been invested in this is tremendous. And we are going to take a reprieve and rest. That's why we didn't ask for help with the refreshments today. Recently, I shared with someone that I've been concerned about asking for help with our Christmas Cookie platters that we're taking to businesses we do business with throughout the year. We seriously considered cancelling the Harvest Celebration for the same reason. You've been very generous and we don't want to wear you out. We, though, have to move to the next phases. This is only the first hurdle of some other major hurdles that we've been talking about all along. It's not the time to rest on our laurels.

Some years ago, there was a huge celebration at a New Orleans municipal pool. It was the first summer in memory that there had not been a drowning at this particular New Orleans city pool. In honor of the occasion, 200 people gathered, including 100 certified lifeguards. As the party was breaking up and the four lifeguards on duty began to clear the pool, they found a fully dressed body in the deep end. They tried to unsuccessfully to revive Jerome Moody, 31, but it was too late. He'd drowned surrounded by lifeguards celebrating their successful season. This is not the time to relax.

So as I reflected on what to share with you today, I felt that the Lord was bringing key incidents from the lives of some Bible heroes that echo with where we're at today. The first is an isolated and obscure passage about Abraham, the Father of the Faithful.

2. We need to remember where we came from and where we're growing. Joshua 24:1-3 says, "*Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel. And they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan...'*"

When we think of idols, most of us picture something like big statues of Buddha. That's not biblically accurate. An idol is anything that comes before God in your life.

Our ***Building Changed Lives Together*** goes nose to nose with two of the biggest idols in American culture: time and money. What are the two biggest complaints that nearly all of us have? I don't have enough time and I don't have enough money.

I'm not sure what this several weeks challenge has done for you but I know what it's done for me. I struggle with loving my time and my money more than Jesus. A symptom for me that I love time more than I love Jesus is when I have to fight to find time to pray. This challenge though has really driven me to my knees. It's brought a fresh sense of a greater need for prayer and intimacy with God in my life. I don't want to lose that. I want to continue to grow in this area of my walk with the Lord.

It's tempting though to worship at the idol of human *doing*, whereas God has created us

to be human *beings*. It's idolatry when we find our purpose, fulfillment and meaning in what we *do*, not in who we are. Our Heavenly Father wants us to walk with Him, to adore Him and depend on Him. That's had an awakening in our church during this campaign.

And I struggle with materialism. Don't we all? We own a house. Things break down. There's always a room that needs painting or furniture that could be replaced. Black Friday is symptomatic of our culture. We want, we want, we want. I know that I do. This challenge has helped me reevaluate what's truly important and helped me put my drive for the material on a healthy diet and focus instead on the eternal.

And we need this. Our church has needed for a long time to grow in our understanding of God's values and how to biblically use our finances. And we want to keep growing in this area.

I believe that prayer and stewardship have had a fresh breath of God's Spirit in our church. To quote the old song, "*We've only just begun.*" We want to keep growing and claiming new ground in these areas and other areas of spiritual growth. **We need to remember where we came from and where we're growing.**

3. We need to keep stepping out in faith...even when we're afraid. Satan loves to use fear to paralyze us. He doesn't want us to trust God or step out in faith.

One of the most familiar accounts from the life of Peter was when he walked on water. Matthew 14 records it for us. Jesus tells His disciples to not be afraid because He's coming to rescue them. But Jesus is walking on the water. Not exactly a scene even seasoned fisherman have ever seen. So Peter cries out in the midst of the storm to Jesus, "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water." Jesus says, "Come." So Peter gets down out of the boat and begins walking on the water toward Jesus. Matthew 14:30 records though, "*But when Peter saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me!'*"

When God leads us to step out on faith, we're fine as long as we trust His Word and keep our eyes on Jesus. But we start sinking when we look at the storms that in our life. Something, too, that we often miss in this wonderful account is this. You see, most of us shake our heads at Peter because he started doubting when he was walking on the water. Remember, though, that there were 11 other disciples still hanging on to the sides of that boat for dear life. They never even got out of the boat. Most of us are not very brave. We live in one fear or another. We want to stay in the boat.

One dark night outside a small town, a fire started inside the local chemical plant. Before long it exploded into flames and an alarm went out to fire departments from miles around. After fighting the fire for over an hour, the chemical company president approached the fire chief and said, "All of our secret formulas are in the vault in the center of the plant. They must be saved! I will give \$50,000 to the engine company that brings them out safely!" As soon as the chief heard this, he ordered the firemen to strengthen their attack on the blaze. After two more hours of attacking the fire, the president of the company offered \$100,000 to the engine company that could bring out the company's secret files.

From the distance, a long siren was heard and another fire truck came into sight. It was a local volunteer fire company composed entirely of men over 65. To everyone's amazement, the little fire engine raced through the chemical plant gates and drove straight into the middle of the blazing inferno. In the distance the other firemen watched

as the old timers hopped off of their rig and began to fight the fire with an effort that they'd never seen before. After an hour of intense fighting, the volunteer company had extinguished the fire and saved the secret formulas.

Joyous, the chemical company president announced that he'd double the reward to \$200,000 and walked over to personally thank each of the volunteers. After thanking each of the old men individually, the president asked the group what they intended to do with the reward money. The fire truck driver looked him right in the eye and said, "The first thing we're going to do is fix the brakes on that truck!"

If you've made a commitment, Satan has probably already tried to scare you. If he hasn't, he will. He'll wake you up in the middle of the night and whisper in your ear that you're a dummy and you can't trust God. Don't sink! Don't fall for it! He'll probably bring storms in your life to rock your boat. Remember, you and I know who created the ocean. His name is "Abba, Father" and He controls the wind and the waves.

When one Mom saw a thunderstorm forming in the mid-afternoon, she worried about her seven-year-old daughter who'd be walking the three blocks from school to home. Deciding to meet her, the mother saw her little girl walking nonchalantly along, stopping to smile whenever lightning flashed. Glimpsing her mother, the little girl ran to her, explaining enthusiastically, "Mommy, all the way home, God's been taking my picture!"

Christian friend, don't you let Satan scare you. God has your picture. He knows your name and He's got it all under control. You can trust Him. **We need to keep stepping out in faith...even when we're afraid.**

4. We need to pray for our brothers and sisters in our church family who've committed to give above their regular giving that God would provide for them and bless them. One of my heroes in the Old Testament is Elijah. I'm looking forward to meeting him in heaven one day. One of the great incidents in his life is found in 1 Kings 17. Let me encourage you to read it for yourself this afternoon but let me tell you the story.

King Ahab and his wife, Queen Jezebel were the Mr. and Mrs. Hitler of the Old Testament. Not only were they leading Israel into perverse wickedness and the worshiping of idols, Jezebel had commanded that all the prophets of God in the land were to be killed.

Because of the great sin of the people, the Lord judged the nation and caused that there would be no rain. This lasted for three and a half years. Elijah the Prophet was commanded by the Lord to go stay by the Brook Cherith. The Lord told Elijah that He'd provide for him and keep him safe from Jezebel who had a bounty out on him. So God sends ravens to feed Elijah for many days, but when the brook dries up, God commands him to go to Zarephath where the Lord had prepared a poor widow to take care of Elijah. Now Jezebel was from this same area, so in sending Elijah to Zarephath God was sending Elijah into Jezebel's territory. It was a trip that was way out of his way, but he went because God commanded him too and he knew that God had prepared someone to provide for him.

So here's this widow who along with her son are starving. Perhaps she was a widow because her husband had already passed away during the famine from starvation. Maybe she was gathering sticks at the gate of the city because she was too weak from starvation to go much further.

Elijah finds her, and she and her boy have nothing left to eat but *"a handful of meal in a barrel and a little oil in cruse."* But Elijah asks her to give him what little food she had left, and she did. Even though she knew that she and her son would have nothing to eat. She prepared the last few crumbs she had for Elijah and Elijah promised her that if she trusted him and trusted God, God would take care of her and supply her needs. She wouldn't run out of food. And that's what happened. Her food didn't fail the whole time Elijah stayed at her home and Elijah lived in the widow's household throughout the famine.

When we obey God, God takes care of us. Jane and I are experiencing that in our own lives. I shared an account of how God did that for us this past week in today's Pastor's Pen. And for those of us who've stepped out in faith and committed to step out together in this challenge, I truly believe God is going to do that for you.

So this is what I want you to do. I don't want you to forget what God did for you during this time. I find that I have a great memory when it comes to my burdens but I tend to have Alzheimer's when it comes to God's blessings and answered prayer...and you're probably like me.

So we've made "Memory Notebooks" that you can pick up as you leave today to help you remember how God has taken care of you. Please use this notebook during these three years and keep a record of how God provides for you. I truly hope it's something that's a blessing to you and your children...even your grandchildren. Wouldn't it be cool if one day your grandchildren stumble on that notebook and they ask, "Grandpa, what's this?" Then you get to tell them about our **Building Changed Lives**

Together campaign and how God blessed you and took care of your needs, and used you to be a blessing to our church.

But I want you to do one more thing. If you'll join me in this, I want you to note it on your Connection Card. You see, we're family and we need to pray for each other. So regularly and even daily, I want you to pray for others who've stepped out in faith to give for our **Building Changed Lives Together** campaign, and I want you to ask God to bless them and meet their needs. If you'll do that, please note it on your card today.

Every day we're dependent on God for our lives and everything that we have and need. Most of the time, we don't think about it. I want us together as the Grace Family to not only think about it but to pray for one another. Will you do that? Will you join me?

God is not going to abandon us. He hears our prayers, and He answers them. Often in ways we never imagined. We're on a journey. Let's trust Him and do it together. Let's hold each other up in prayer and use this to expand and deepen our prayer lives. Let's remember how God provides and blesses us! **We need to pray for our brothers and sisters in our church family who've committed to give above their regular giving that God would provide for them and bless them.**

Conclusion: God's done some marvelous things in our midst and we have reason to celebrate. But this is God's doing! Nobody thought we could do this. Nearly all of us were skeptical at the beginning. Let us never forget that this is God's doing.

What **Building Changed Lives** has accomplished is from God and it is for God! He made us. And He made us for Him. He's done this work. And He has done this work for Him!

So let's give Him the glory! I feel so blessed and privileged to be your Pastor at this period in our church's history. I can't wait to see all that God has for us...just around the

corner.

Let's remember where we came from and where we're growing. Let's keep stepping out in faith...even when we're afraid. Let's commit to praying for our brothers and sisters in our church family who've joined us on this journey that God would abundantly bless them.