

5 Lessons from '21

- Happy New Year! Jesus said to John in Revelation 21, "Behold, I am making all things new." He is, even now and this year not even two days old! As some of you know, it has been my custom most years to preach a sermon from my journal at the beginning of a new year. I look back at things I wrote in my journal that the Lord taught me during the previous year and today I want to share five lessons with you that meant something to me, and perhaps they will bless you as well.
1. **Let all the peoples praise God.** Psalm 67 is a prayer that God would bless his people and make us a blessing to others. "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us." Why? "That your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations." Why? "Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!" God's blessings poured out on us are for us but also for the nations, the people groups, that the diverse peoples in the world (popular topic these days) may be united in their praise for the one true God (unpopular topic these days). The nations should be glad and sing for joy because God (verse 4) will "judge the peoples with equity." A trigger word, that. "Equity." Not with God, though. The ESV Study Bible says the judge in the Old Testament was the one who protected the innocent, and he was the only one who could. God is the eternal and righteous judge, and only in him is there true equity. And it must be so with those who are his people. God -> Us -> nations/peoples -> God!
 2. **The unfading crown of glory.** A good friend and fellow pastor, Dan Cubino, went to be with the Lord too soon for all of us but at just the right time for him. Dan had been a Burlington police officer, a pastor, a Sheriff's Deputy, and a pastor again. That's where his heart was, to shepherd the flock of God. When Dan left here about 5 years ago to become the pastor at Hopedale Church, my relationship with him changed from pastor to fellow pastor. We met together monthly with other pastors and the last year or so, it was for breakfast at Cracker Barrel. The month before he died, at Cracker Barrel, Dan shared his struggles with trying to grow an aging congregation. I said, "Maybe God sent you there just to shepherd the flock until they're all gone." Dan was a faithful shepherd to the end. I wrote in my journal the day after Dan died, "I will miss his great sense of humor, his big smile, his love for the Lord, and for the church." Peter wrote to church elders, "shepherd the flock that is among you," (that's all we can do, right?). Peter wrote, also, "And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory." There's a crown for Dan.
 3. **Young people, learn what you grow up with!** I love the stories in the book of Daniel. And when we think about the book of Daniel, our mind usually goes to the den of lions and the miracle God worked to save Daniel from being lunch for those beasts. Or we think of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the three Hebrew boys being tossed into a burning fiery furnace that was so hot that the "mighty men" who bound them up and threw them into the furnace were burned up themselves. But not the Hebrew boys. King Nebuchadnezzar looked into the fiery furnace and saw not three but FOUR men walking around in there and the fourth man, the king said, looked "like a son of the gods." But

what struck me this year as I read the book again was in the very beginning, when we see that these four youths who were taken from Jerusalem rose to the top in the pagan kingdom to which they were stolen away. Nebuchadnezzar gathered all the exiles who had been taught for three years in Babylon, and in Daniel 1:19 we read, “none was found like Daniel, Hananiah (Shadrach), Mishael (Meshach), and Azariah (Abednego).” Now listen. These four young men had been given grace by God to learn the culture **and** to grow in spiritual maturity. He gave them “skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.” (Verse 17) Here’s what occurred to me as I read that. “How much more must our young people, growing up in the church and in godly families, be able to speak with wisdom and knowledge about the Bible, about sound doctrine, about the church, and about the Lord?” Not because they have head knowledge or because they heard it from others, but because they know the Lord. We are still in Babylon, a symbol for the world and its wickedness in the Bible, and those who know the Lord will stand out and will shine for him. Young people, learn the things that are important, eternal, life changing!

4. Good friends return. So rare. So wonderful.

Sometimes friends we have loved and learned with who left the church for a season come back. And what a joy that brings to the hearts of all who knew them and what a blessing for all who will now get to know them. It reminded me of a column I wrote about 8 years ago where I included this: Friendship is a sheltering tree. That’s from a poem by Coleridge, but the truth is all through Scripture. We need friends who know us very well and can speak plain truth into our lives. Solomon said, “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow.”

5. Teach us to number our days. Psalm 90 is a lament written by Moses after some unspecified disaster. Most believe Moses wrote this as the children of Israel, now led by Joshua, were getting ready to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land. Moses reminds them of the judgment of God that fell upon a whole generation because of their unfaithfulness, and now they are given another opportunity to trust the Lord and be faithful to the covenant he had established with his people.

The psalm talks about the passing of time that cannot be stopped and is like a vapor. “For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past.” (verse 4) The psalm reminds us that God is eternal. And faithful. “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.” (verse 1) “from everlasting to everlasting you are God.” (verse 2) But for man...

Life is short. “The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble.” (verse 10) This leads Moses to pray that God’s people would understand that without his help, nothing we do has lasting value. He prays in the last two verses, “Let your work be shown to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us, yes, establish the work of our hands!” Moses cried out to the Lord that his work of the past 40 years would not be in vain. This Psalm inspired Isaac Watts’ great hymn, “O God, Our Help in Ages Past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from

the stormy blast, and our eternal home. Under the shadow of Thy throne, thy saints have dwelt secure; sufficient is thine arm alone, and our defense is sure."

But my favorite verse of Psalm 90 is verse 12, and more and more the older I get. "So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom." It does not mean we try and figure out how many days we have left. Only God knows that, and he numbered them before even one of them came to be (Psalm 139:16). Solomon wrote, "For man does not know his time." (Ecc. 9:12) No, Moses is asking God to teach his people how to make the most out of the few days we have. Even if you live to 120 as Moses did, your days on the earth are few. When my Dad died 15 years ago, my mom did not want to live. And you know that happens so often, doesn't it? One spouse dies and the other follows close behind. This from a 2008 National Institutes of Health study that examined more than 370,000 elderly married couples in the United States: researchers found that within the first three months after one spouse dies, the chance that their partner will also pass is **between 30 and 90 percent**.

I told my mom in 2006 that God had numbered her days and that I believed she had many more days left. He's not done with you here, Mom. You have more you can do for his name's sake! And as I shared at her funeral, I believe the last 15 years of mom's life were perhaps her most fruitful. She lived for Jesus, she lived to serve others, and she did it well. I remember going into her apartment and seeing stacks of cards, every week, stamped and waiting to be mailed. I got a letter last week from a friend of mine that I roomed with in graduate school for a while. I haven't seen him in more than 40 years, and he wrote to say how sorry he was that he heard about my mom's death the day after the funeral. He also wrote, "When my wife (Sandy) first met your mom at Old Town Baptist Church, she told me that your mom was so sweet that it had to be fake...an act...because no one could be that nice and sweet in reality. As time went by, Sandy was blown away by how real and genuine her sweet spirit was! When Michelle, our daughter, first wanted to go to China with Campus Crusade for a year to be a missionary, she had to raise about \$30K to go. Sandy and I thought it would never happen. Once again, your mom was there with a very, very generous donation that put Michelle on her way and made us believe that the Lord can perform even financial miracles through his children!" That's just one story I heard through the last 15 years about ways mom had served. She took people to the doctor, visited shut-ins and brought them chicken pies from her favorite store, went by a friend's house to put eye drops in her eyes three times a day for several weeks, wrote a check for a friend's son who had been robbed, a check that would replace everything he had lost. Her friend was blown away and said, "Tommye, why would you do this?" Mom said, "Because he has a need and I have more than I need."

Look, if my mom were here, she would be the first to tell you that she was a sinner saved by grace and there was nothing special about her. But I know this. Mom numbered her days and made each one count for the Lord. You and I can, as well.