



The State of the Church

If you have a Bible—and I hope you do——let me encourage you to open up with me to two places: Philippians 1 and 1 Kings 19. We’re going to be in both those places today. While you’re turning, I want to give you a preview of where we will be going, Lord willing, starting next Sunday. We’ve started reading through the end of the Old Testament, beginning with Ezekiel all the way up to Christmas, in our Bible Reading Plan.

By the way, Ezekiel—along with a variety of other Old Testament prophetic books—can be a little challenging at different points. We read Ezekiel 1 through with our kids and they said, “I don’t get it.” If you have questions along those lines, a good study Bible is extremely helpful. I would recommend this regardless, but particularly as we’re reading through these Old Testament books. Find a good study Bible, like the ESV Study Bible, which would go along with the translation we use in our worship gatherings. They’ll have notes along the way that will help you understand some of the things that are going on. If you don’t have a good study Bible, I would encourage you to get one. ESV Study Bible is one, but there are many other good ones.

As we’re reading through the end of the Old Testament each day, starting here in Ezekiel, next week, Lord willing, on Sunday, we’re going to start diving in all together on Sundays into the book of 1 Peter. I’ll share more next Sunday about why this book of the Bible in particular, but suffice it to say for now, it is so applicable to what we are walking through during these days.

We’re also going to keep memorizing Scripture together, if you’re up for it. So this fall we’re going to memorize the first chapter of 1 Peter together, hiding God’s Word in our hearts. It’s so encouraging to see so many of you who have shared with me that you’ve done little or no memorization of Scripture before, but now you’re memorizing entire chapters of the Bible—just a little bit at a time. I would encourage you to work on the first three verses between now and this next Sunday.

With all that set-up about what’s coming, today is going to be a little different. I mentioned last week that I wanted to share today from my heart about where we are as a church in these unusual days and where we’re going as a church, particularly this fall. With that said, if you’re joining us for the first time, if you’re still exploring what it means to follow Jesus—or maybe you’re part of another church family—this is going to be a bit of family time this morning, but we still invite you to be a part. You are welcome in this home. I hope you’ll be encouraged today.

If you're considering following Jesus in your life, stay with me, particularly to the end, where I want you to see a powerful picture of God's love for you. Or if you're part of another church family, I hope this will be encouraging to you as you think about what it means to be a part of your church family during these days. Or maybe if you're considering becoming a part of the McLean Bible Church family during this unique time, I hope this will be helpful.

There's so much I want to share, so I'm going to share it through three images, three pictures. The first image or picture is a map. The second one is a circle with ropes. The third is a jar of water. So we've got three pictures that I hope will help us understand what Philippians 1 and 1 Kings 19 are talking about.

A map

We'll start with a map. A lot of things have obviously changed in our lives, in the world and in our church, over the last year. What has not changed is the mission of our church. What does McLean Bible Church exist for? We exist to glorify God by making disciples and multiplying churches among all nations, beginning in Greater Washington, DC. That's our mission statement and you can learn more about where we're going as a church at mcleanbible.org/newchapter.

When people ask me, "Where are we going as a church? What do you envision when you and other leaders think about the future of this church?" I tell them about the rich history we have, demonstrating God's faithfulness over decades in and through this church. It started with just a handful of families here in Greater Washington, DC and now has spread out all across the city, with thousands and thousands of people.

In addition to our rich history, we find ourselves right now as a unique family with over 100 different countries represented in our church, united by the gospel and surrounded by urgent need. There are millions of people around us who are in need of Christ, along with billions of people in the world who have never even heard the name of Jesus. We have unique opportunities to take the gospel into this city and into the ends of the earth. This leads to an unprecedented opportunity to make His glory known.

In order to experience family life together as a church, to meet the urgent needs around us in the world and to steward the unprecedented opportunities we have together as a church family, we want to increase our commitment to church life. Specifically, we want every member of MBC to eventually become part of a church group, where we're caring for each other and growing together in Christ. We want every member of this body caring for each other like family, growing together in Christ and making disciples of Christ on mission together.

When it comes to this pandemic, we thought maybe we would be closer to getting back to normal by now. Obviously, that's not the case. I'm standing in a room with a limited number of people wearing masks, while most of us are still gathering online. We're not able to fully step into all we've planned, including the crux of the church which is small groups. These groups hinge on being together.

Picture the star on the left side of this map as the previous chapter of MBC. By God’s grace, it represents all He has done in and through our church. Don’t read too much into the geography here; we’re not moving to the Far East. Picture this more like what’s on my heart and mind every single day as I’ve been praying for our adopted son who is still in that part of the world and whom I want to get to as soon as possible.



On our way there, I picture this as having hit some turbulence in the air and we have put our masks on. On our way there, it’s like we’re doing a layover in Paris. I know that this pandemic doesn’t feel like a layover in Paris, but that’s the picture I want you to have in your mind here.



So picture this middle star as an interim chapter on our way to the new chapter. You need to realize that we’re not at our final destination, but we are here in the middle and we’re going to be here a little while—at least for this fall, maybe longer.

Obviously we’re evaluating all along the way. One pastor friend of mine described it this way, “When you’re traveling and you’re going to stay in a hotel for just a couple days, you leave your clothes in your suitcase and live out of your suitcase. But if you’re going to be there for a long time, then maybe you take your clothes out of the suitcase and actually put them in the drawers in that hotel room.”

That’s how I would encourage us to think about at least this fall when it comes to this stopover. We’re going to unpack and settle in, realizing we’re going to be here a little while. Instead of thinking about how we’re going to thrive in the days to come, I want us to think about how we can thrive in the middle, in this interim chapter, realizing we’re not where we want to be, wanting to thrive where we are.

A circle with ropes

That map picture then leads to the second image which revolves around ropes in a circle. How do we thrive in the interim chapter right here? At this point I want to invite some guys who are going to help me out. There are four ropes up here and they’re officially social-distancing ropes—six feet long. I want

you to grab the ends of these ropes and form a circle right here on the stage. I want to illustrate with this picture that we are not able, at this moment, to connect as closely as we want to connect. If we were not in this pandemic now, I'd ask them to come up and form a circle. They would grab hands and form a circle—without ropes. That's the way we're made to connect with one another. We're not made to connect with one another, particularly as the church, via distance technology or spreading out in a room with masks on. But we want to be connected as best we can during these days and that involves some creativity. This is a picture I hope will describe our church as being creatively connected to one another.



At this point I want to draw your attention to our website—mcleanbible.org—where you will see a screen pop up that says, “Connect with us online.” As soon as you press the “Get Connected” button, you will find a way to get connected if in any way you are disconnected right now from other followers of Jesus. This is intended to be a “one stop shop” to help you get connected in all kinds of different ways. You’ll see how you can get connected on social media or ENEWS. When you sign up for our ENEWS, then you’ll receive information about our church gatherings. There are also COVID updates there.

Next you’ll see an area labeled “Get Connected: Groups.” If you are not part of a group and would like to be, click on “Join a group”. Groups are meeting in all kinds of different ways. Some stay technologically distant from one another; others meet in person in wise ways. You can get connected to a group or you can get connected to a class. We have several different classes going on, such as for men, women, married couples, engaged couples, people going through grief and others. Then of course there is also information about our Sunday worship gatherings, which are translated live every week into Spanish, Korean and Mandarin.

The website has a place where you can download the Bible Reading Plan and the discussion guides that flow from every single Sunday. These are things you can do with your family or your group. We have a “Pray the Word” podcast that’s walking through Ezekiel with a daily five-minute prayer through a verse from that chapter in Ezekiel. You might also want more information about being a follower of Jesus. You can get connected to a local outreach through all kinds of opportunities to make the love of Christ known in the city during these days.

Then there’s global outreach as well. Actually, this coming Saturday, if you’d like to go on a virtual mission trip, you and your family can do that this Saturday in the Dominican Republic. We have resources for children, students and families with special needs or families in general. There’s a virtual Bible study for young adults. All of these things can be found on this “Get Connected” page.

The reason I want to emphasize this is to say we want to be as connected as possible. I want to encourage particularly every member of MBC to get connected to a group, a class, a service opportunity—something so you're not isolated during these days. Again, for those who are not part of our congregation, you can still be part of these classes no matter where you are in the world.

One particular class I want to make you aware of is one I'm going to be leading starting this Wednesday. It's called "Foundations for Life in Christ and Leadership in the Church." We're actually going to do this class as an in-person, mid-week Bible study for anybody who wants to be here in person. It will be here at our Tysons location, but you can join on line and be part of this from anywhere you are. Amidst everything going on around us in the world and all kinds of divergent conversations, we want to make sure we don't lose focus on what's most important—now and forever. Whether you're a new follower of Jesus or a seasoned leader in the church, our aim will be to ask, "What does it mean to live for and with Jesus, to lead in the church accordingly and to live for His glory in the world?"

The whole purpose of this class and others is to answer, "How can we creatively connect with one another in this interim chapter?" Let me keep going with this imagery, not just to get connected, but to stay connected in a world that is extremely prone right now to divide us and break these connections. We live in a church world that right now is filled with division. In all my conversations with pastors from other churches during the last few months, without exception they talk about how division in the churches they pastor is at an all-time high. This can happen over all kinds of issues, such as race and justice issues, over regathering, over whether or not to wear a mask. One pastor friend of mine whom I respect deeply and who has led the church he pastors for 26 years said by far this is the worst he's ever seen it when it comes to division. I said, "If you could put it on a scale of one to ten, with one being 'We're holding together strong' and ten being 'We're falling apart in all kinds of different ways,' where would you put it? He said, "I'd put it at about seven or eight." I'm hearing this in so many different ways, with church members dividing from church members and church leaders dividing from church leaders.

So to share my heart for MBC, I want to associate each of these four guys holding the ropes with four friends of mine. I'm closer to some of these friends than others, but I think I can genuinely call each of these brothers "friends." You may not recognize all their names, so I'll give you a brief explanation of each of them. First, we'll start back here with Gavin who is going to stand for John MacArthur the pastor of Grace Community Church in southern California. He has faithfully preached the Bible for 40+ years as pastor of one church. He has written all kinds of commentaries and has been extremely influential in my life and ministry. .

Working my way around our circle, DJ is going to stand for Mark Dever, pastor of a sister church here in Metro DC called Capitol Hill Baptist Church. Mark has faithfully pastored that church for decades. He has preached the Word and promoted the health of the church there, as well having written much on

and encouraged healthy churches all over the world. He has also been extremely influential in my life and ministry.

Next, Gabe here is going to be Thabiti Anyabwile, pastor at Anacostia River Church in southeast DC. He planted that church in recent years, but he pastored before that. Again, he faithfully preaches God's Word week in and week out. He has written on the healthy church and healthy church members. He's written specifically on the gospel and Islam, being a former Muslim who came to faith in Jesus. He's also written on African-American theology. He too has been influential in my life and ministry.

Then finally, Geo over there is going to represent Francis Chan. We met years ago at a conference where we were both preaching. Our zeal for disciple-making led us to work on a project together called "Multiply." He's written books, including Crazy Love, Forgotten God about the Holy Spirit, and You and Me Together about marriage.

Here's the deal. These friends of mine live in a church world that wants to divide these four brothers from each other. It wants to pit them against each other, wanting them to critique one another in different ways because they don't believe the same thing about everything. But each of these brothers, I am confident, loves Jesus and His Word, clear down to the details of what we believe in our statement of faith, giving their lives to make the glory and gospel of Jesus known in the world. I want it to be crystal clear that each one of these brothers would be welcome as a member of McLean Bible Church. We are not going to divide from one another when there is a heart for Jesus, confidence in His Word and zeal to make the gospel known in the world at the center of our church. This is not going to be a church where we're going to let go of these ropes.

This doesn't mean we're going to think the same thing about everything. We're going to have disagreements. When we hit tough issues, we're going to open God's Word and do the best we can to understand it. This is what we did when things started to come out more and more about race and justice in our culture over recent months. We looked at over 750 different references in Scripture to try to understand what God's Word says. Even that effort got skewed in this environment we're in, to where people were spreading rumors that were just blatantly false, rumors that MBC is supporting Black Lives Matter as an organization, or MBC is promoting secular theories like Critical Race Theory. Just to be clear, to shut down those rumors, MBC in no way supports Black Lives Matter as an organization as unbiblical and antithetical to the gospel in so many different ways. MBC in no way embraces secular theories like Critical Race Theory as a worldview that is also unbiblical and antithetical to the gospel.

We don't need secular organizations and secular theories; we have Jesus and His Word. As a church, as best we can, we're going to hold these ropes tightly with God's Word at the center of all we do. We know this is challenging. Even with our holding fast to the Word, we've got different views, but we want to hold on to these ropes. In a political world and church world that wants to divide us, I want to be crystal clear, we're holding on to these ropes.

I've written a book that comes out this week called Before You Vote. I genuinely hope this book will be helpful in navigating the decision we all make with how we steward our vote. Our plan is to have free copies for those who come to in-person gatherings. All proceeds from this book go to promoting the glory of Christ in all nations.

I want to let you in on a little secret. The hidden purpose of this book is to fight for unity in the church. We live in a political world, even in the church, where there are people saying, "You cannot be a follower of Jesus, truly a Christian, and vote for Joe Biden." And there are others who are writing entire books saying, "There's no way you can love Jesus and vote for Donald Trump."

We live in a world that's saying, "You're not even a Christian, you're not even a true believer, you don't love Jesus, if you vote for..." To hear crystal clear. McLean Bible Church is not going to be a place where we divide over the vote; we don't break fellowship in Christ over that and question one another's love for Jesus. We live in a world that wants us to break these connections, but I urge you to hold on to these ropes in an Ephesians 4:3 kind of way—*"eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."* Bending over backwards to hold on to these ropes—even where we disagree with each other—realize Jesus and His Word are sufficient to hold us together. I know that means there's a lot of need for grace around this circle—grace from members to each other, grace amongst pastors. I want to shepherd faithfully every single person in this circle.

When I find myself speaking to one person in the circle, I feel like somebody over there starts to misunderstand what I'm saying here. It's challenging. I ask directly for your grace, for me and other pastors, as we try to do our best. Obviously, none of us is perfect in shepherding the whole body, but we do want to hold on to these ropes. Why? Philippians 1:27 States, *"Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel."*

We are commanded as the church to stand firm, holding these ropes, in one spirit, with one mind—not around all the things we might disagree on, but one mind around God's Word and the gospel. We want to strive side by side for that gospel.

Now there's another way to make a circle with these ropes. Can you think of what it might be? Can you guys make this circle a little differently, yet holding on to the ropes in the same way? The connection is just as strong, but the perspective is now very different. When holding on in the first way, they did what anyone would have done to make a circle, either holding hands or a rope, looking at each other. The challenge is that when you're just looking at each other, you start to notice all the things that are different about the others. You might even start to get frustrated with some of those differences. But when you turn out, it starts to change your perspective. This is the picture I want you to see of the church. When we're facing each other, there's a lot of temptation to point out the things we wish were different about each other. When we're facing out and looking at a city with five-plus-million people right now on a road

that leads to an eternal hell, it changes our conversation. It changes what we're concerned about. It changes what we're focused on.

When our eyes go beyond that and we see a world where two to three billion people have never even heard the name of Jesus—people walking through a pandemic right now who have no hope whatsoever in the gospel of Jesus Christ—when our eyes are fixed there, it changes our perspective



on what it means to be in community with one another. We are standing firm, one spirit, one mind, striving side by side for our faith and the spread of the gospel. This is the picture I pray will mark MBC during this interim chapter.

As these guys return to their seats, I want to pause at this point and show you a video that shows how this concept of looking out together has been playing out through this church family over these last months. When we first began to gather on line, recognizing things were going to be very strange, we said, “We’re going to turn this building into a warehouse for meeting needs all across our city. We’re going to work across all our locations in all kinds of different places, spreading the gospel in the middle of a pandemic.” Watch the fruit of community on mission over the last few months, even as we look to continue to do this in the coming months.

David: Throughout the history of the church of Jesus Christ, we are a people who run toward need, not away from it.

Church members giving out food: Have a blessed day! Can I pray for you all? Anything specific? So, Lord, I pray You will give her Your peace and joy today. Help her have a very blessed week. We pray these things in Christ Jesus’ name.

David: As soon as our city and church began to realize the ramifications of this pandemic in a way that was unprecedented in our lifetimes, we knew as a church that there would be unique challenges we’re about to face, but there are also unprecedented opportunities to share God’s love in the middle of these challenges.

Volunteer: We’re doing food distribution today at Rockview Elementary School with 400 boxes of groceries, plus at Summit Hall where they are just as busy as us. Then tomorrow we have Poplar Mill; Thursday, Viers Mill; Friday, Harmony Hills. We get to serve the community and love on the people. It’s been a blessing during the pandemic to meet the people, pray for them and care for their needs. That’s what we’re doing!

David: It has been nothing short of awesome to see God at work. No one else could take credit for that operation that basically came into being almost overnight.

Distribution supervisor: Two and a half years ago, we felt the Lord really calling us to expand our food ministry option here at McLean Bible Church. In an effort to reach people where they were, we wanted to make it mobile. So we set up markets, bringing in fresh produce and other healthy food options which we felt was really important. We were really, really grateful that the Lord laid that foundation for us. We were able very quickly to serve about 250-300 families a week, because we've been doing that for the last two and a half years.

Another manager: Then the pandemic hit and we exponentially grew to meet the needs of the community. The first week I believe we served about 800 families, then the need continued to grow.

Supervisor: So, because of the Lord's provision and His sovereignty in laying that foundation a few years ago, when the coronavirus hit, we were able to quickly expand what we had. Now we're able to serve between nine and ten thousand families a week.

Manager: This is the schedule for the week: the day of the week, the different locations we're going to, how many boxes are going to each of the locations, the truck they're going on, our point of contact, what time we need to be at the site and who's driving. It just gets filled in as the week goes on, as we get volunteers to sign up, as we get additional sites booked.

Supervisor: We're here six days a week and we're open close to 14 hours a day. So some of the biggest needs we have right now are definitely volunteers. This requires about a hundred-plus volunteers a day for packing shifts between 8:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. We also have a need for volunteers to go out to our sites and help distribute food. We have a need for evangelism team members who love sharing the gospel and love praying with people. We always need truck drivers, plus we need people to give to the Care fund.

David: Thousands upon thousands of families are being served through tens of thousands of boxes and millions of meals and millions of dollars, all in the name of Jesus, all with the gospel at the forefront. The people of God are running toward needs in the city with the gospel.

Supervisor: So this outreach is really more than just about feeding people. We want to get the gospel out there, which is the most important aspect of it for us. Of course, we want to give out the food boxes to the local communities, but we also are here to meet people's spiritual needs.

Volunteer: Jesus died on the cross for your sins, so that you might have a relationship with the Father, an abundant one.

Supervisor: This is what sets us apart from any other food packing place you might find here in the DC area. We're sharing the gospel with them as well as nutritional nourishment. We want to make sure as much as possible that every person who comes to any of our distribution sites hears the

gospel and has a chance to ask for prayer. We've seen God moving in amazing ways. There have been so many salvations and incredible stories.

Volunteer: There's one site in DC where we started out with maybe 20 people who came. Now yesterday we went there and gave out 300 boxes within 30 minutes. The community at that site has really come around it and we have maybe 25 volunteers from the community who come each time to help. They also want to start a church in that community, which is just incredible. They see the deep need there—the abuse and addictions—and they want to come alongside that community to help it in any way they can. They've already started meeting on Sunday to organize that church there. It's been amazing to see that growth. We went there giving boxes of food and sharing the gospel with them; the salvations that have come from that community are just amazing to see.

David: I'm so thankful for God's grace in this church, the way the brothers and sisters who make up our church family have run, not away from need, but toward need in the middle of a pandemic. They have seen the challenge said, "We want to meet needs in the name of Jesus." As a result, people have come to know Christ. Churches are in the process of being started, all while people's physical needs are being met in the middle of a pandemic. I pray that the fruit of this is Matthew 5:14-16—that people might see good deeds and give glory to our God in heaven.

Standing firm in one spirit, side by side, for the faith and the spread of the gospel. This is what we want to be the story of our church in the middle of this pandemic. I should mention—and you saw it at the end of that video—there are continuing needs for volunteers in all those different capacities. On that "Get Connected" page you can find out how to connect with them as an individual, as a family, as a couple, as a group, to explore those opportunities. Especially as things start to open up more in different ways, there will be even more need for volunteers in all those areas.

A jar of water

All of this leads to the third picture: a jar of water. First a map, then a circle with ropes, now a jar of water. I want to read from 1 Kings 19:1-5. In 1 Kings 18, Elijah, a prophet of God, calls down fire from heaven. He prays and fire falls from heaven. Then he prays and rain falls from the sky, after years of drought. He then outruns a chariot. First Kings 18 is a high point, for sure—seeing the glory of God in fire and rain. That makes 1 King 19:1-5 very surprising. Listen to what the Bible says.

"Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done"—Ahab was the evil king in that day, Jezebel was his wife, and they were leading the people into all kinds of idolatry—"and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword"—the false prophets of Baal. "Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, 'So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.'" Basically Jezebel threatens Elijah.

Now, what do we expect Elijah to say at this point? “I mean, really, Jezebel? You and what army? I just called down fire from heaven. I just called down water from the sky. And you’re making a threat against me? Bring it on.” Instead we read this:

³ Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. ⁴ But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers. ⁵ And he lay down and slept under a broom tree.”

Let’s think about this for a minute. Put yourself in Elijah’s shoes. What kind of emotions are you experiencing at this point? He’s clearly afraid. He’s running for his life. Then he sits down and says, “*It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.*” I think emotions to describe Elijah might include tired, disappointed, frustrated, feeling like nothing is going to get better, feeling that he has to face one thing after another.

Over this last week and a half, I sent an email out to hundreds of leaders across all our church locations, asking them to describe emotions they’re feeling right now. These are the words they used: exhausted, wrung out, numb, lonely, weary, apathetic, squeezed, tested, stressed, breaking down emotionally, feeling down and sad, discouraged, isolated, confused, overwhelmed. I could keep going on and on, but I trust we get the point. There are a lot of people right now who feel like Elijah in different ways. Let me ask, do you feel tired these days, exhausted, weary, stressed, discouraged, confused? Not just the leaders in this church, but the members across this church. I’ll just put myself out there.

I read an article the other day—now don’t read too much into this, but it helps illustrate my point. The article was titled, “Six reasons your pastor is about to quit.” The whole article went on to talk about how many, many pastors are on the verge of quitting during these days, struggling to go on. It listed different reasons they’re weary from the pandemic like everybody else, discouraged about the infighting in the church, discouraged about losing members or attendees, questions about finances.

I would pause right here and say, by God’s grace and due to your faithful and generous giving, know that we are at an extremely healthy place financially right now as a church, which is stunning in light of these past six months. Thank you for your continued faithful giving. I say that to encourage you to continue to press on in the ways you have, as there’s so much uncertainty going on these days. I’m thankful as a pastor that we’re not struggling, by God’s grace, in that way right now.

The article goes on to talk about criticisms increasing, church members being weary and pouring out angst on each other and on leaders in the church. Because we have less opportunity to gather together, people are spending a lot of time on social media. Instead of talking face to face about different things, they’re just firing off this and that, hearing what this person and that person said, spreading gossip.

I’m not saying I’m about to quit, but I am saying this is like Elijah in 1 Kings 19. This is Elijah who, along with Moses, appears on the Mount of Transfiguration in the New Testament (Matthew 17:1-

13). He was one of the bedrock heroes of the faith. In 1 Kings 19, he's at the point where he totally wants to quit—not just quit ministry, but he wants to quit life. “I just want to die,” he says to God.

I think about one brother in our church family who's here this morning, whose wife came to that point recently and took her life. The best of us is not immune to getting to this point. I want this picture to be clear to us today as a church because I love what God does in this passage. Elijah is saying, “I'm at the end of myself. I don't even want to go on.” Continuing in verse five:

⁵ And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, “Arise and eat.” ⁶ And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. ⁷ And the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, “Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.” ⁸ And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.

Do you see this picture? Elijah is running in fear. He's struggling. He's weak. He's actually turned his back on what God has called him to do. What does God do? God comes to him and meets him right where he is. Instead of saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah? Get back up. Shape up.” No, God says, “Here's a drink of water. I just want to nourish you.”

That's the picture I want you to see, especially anyone these days who feels tired, disappointed, frustrated, exhausted feeling like nothing is going to get better,. I want you to see God saying to you through His Word, “I meet you right where you are and I want to nourish you with what you need.”

We worship a God Who pursues the weak, Who comes to the struggling where they are. He's a God Who does not leave us alone and Who knows exactly what we need at every moment. This is the gospel. This is the glorious news around which we unite—the fact that all of us were running from God in our sin. God by His grace has come running after you and me. He sent His Son Jesus to die on a cross for us, to save us from our sins, to restore us to a relationship with Him, so we can know we have eternal life in Him, nourished by Him forever and ever and ever.

So I want to encourage you with this picture today. I've spent a lot of time in 1 Kings 19 over recent days and have come out of that time praying seven specific things for myself, and I'm praying these things continually over the members of MBC. I'm not going to talk about them in depth, but I want you to know what I'm praying for you—specifically this fall.

1. Intimacy with Jesus, that you will experience nourishment from Him in every way you need during these days.
2. That you would experience humility before Jesus and others. One of the things in 1 Kings 19 is that God exposes some pride in Elijah's life. God has been exposing pride in my life.
3. For strength through Jesus amidst everything going on. Philippians 4:13 says God provides strength. you can do all things, whatever tomorrow or today holds, through Christ Who strengthens you. I pray that you would experience strength through Jesus

4. Joy in Jesus—Philippians 4:4 kind of joy, “Rejoicing always,” so that you would know, amidst all kinds of difficult circumstances, the joy of Jesus living in you. Even in the middle of all kinds of hurt and pain, I pray that you would know the joy of Jesus in you.
5. For wisdom from Jesus, for all of us who are living in uncertain times, for what to do each day. Whether it’s in marriage, family, teaching kids at home, teachers
6. For courage, that we wouldn’t sit back these days but we would step forward, trusting in God’s Word and making His grace known around us with courage.
7. Ultimately, I pray for rest upon Jesus. I pray that you would experience rest in Him. Isaiah 40:31 says, “*They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.*” What’s the key to soaring like an eagle? Waiting on the Lord, resting in the Lord. I pray that you would experience rest in a 1 Kings 19 kind of way in the Lord.

After this passage, God takes Elijah to a mountain, but He does not reveal Himself in some grand way, like with fire and earthquakes. Instead, it’s a gentle whisper. I pray that you would experience the gentle whisper of God during these days, reminding you that you’re not alone. He’s with you and He loves you. He cares for you and wants to nourish you with everything you need.

So flowing from that, I want to close today with five personal challenges. We’re going to hit these just as quickly as we did those seven. As I was praying and asking, “What might be takeaways today from our time together for each of our lives?” these five things came to mind. These are specifically for MBC members, but I think these would apply for any follower of Jesus. In order to help you remember these five challenges, they each highlight a different vowel.

- **Alone with God.** I challenge you to spend concentrated time alone with God every day. This fall, let’s spend concentrated time alone with God every day. We have a Bible Reading Plan and are meditating on and memorizing Scripture together, so we can soak in the Word of God, the nourishment of God. Spend concentrated time alone with God every day.
- **Encourage others.** Go out of your way to encourage others. In a day with plenty of discouragement to go around, can we just step in and try to be, as a church family, a culture of encouragement? Can we constantly reach out to each other to affirm God’s grace in each other, assuming the best in each other? In a world that is so quick to criticize and so quick to shoot at each other, let’s decide to build each other up rather than tear each other down. Let’s have an eagerness to maintain the unity of the Spirit on mission together, going out of our way to encourage others. When we recognized something about God’s grace in someone else, don’t just think it. Send them an email. Send them a text. Call them up. Go socially-distance with them and tell them face to face. Go out of your way to encourage them.
- **Interim chapter connections.** During this interim period, get and stay connected. If you’re already connected, great. If you’re not connected, get connected and work to stay connected. Fight to stay connected now in view of the new chapter to come. Again, whatever church family you’re a part of, when you’re not able to experience all you want to experience or are designed to experience in that church, what can you do in the meantime to get and stay connected in view of the chapter to come, when things are different, Lord willing, whenever that is?

- **One person to Jesus over the next year.** Work to lead one person to Jesus over the next year. I so miss gathering together with crowds of people at our various locations and seeing people baptized every single week. I can't wait to have a service when we're able to baptize in the same way we've done before. But we can still lead people to Jesus. What if we all just prayed, "God, I want to lead somebody in my sphere of influence to Jesus—friend, family member, coworker, neighbor." If we just prayed and worked toward that, then over the next year thousands of people could have their lives changed for all eternity. No pandemic can keep this from happening. In fact, a pandemic should drive us to an even deeper urgency to seeing this happen. So would you just pray and work to lead one person to Jesus over the next year? And pray that we would personally encourage one another to do that.
- **Unreached people in the world.** I want to encourage you to pray each day for unreached people around the world. I mentioned earlier there are two to three billion people who are walking through the pandemic who have little to no knowledge of Jesus or of God's love in Jesus. If you have not already done so, I encourage you to download the "Unreached of the Day" app from the Joshua Project. Every day there's a different people group. It will take you about 15 seconds to do this alone, with your kids, spouse or with friends. For example, here are the Teli people of India, a Muslim people group. There are 1.694 million of them, with zero followers of Jesus. As far as we know, no one from the Muslim Teli community has put their faith in Jesus. This app tells about them and where they are in India. Just look at it and say, "God, please cause Your grace to be made known among the Teli people of India." If you do that every day, God starts to change your perspective on what matters most and what should consume you the most. There are people around us and people around the world who need the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I'm just convinced that if the members of MBC do these things together, by God's grace we'll find ourselves thriving during these days. I'm not saying it makes it all easy by any means. I am saying there's a way to thrive in the difficulties and the trials. I just want to rally us together to say, "Let's thrive during these days, in our relationships with Jesus, in our relationships with one another and in our work together to spread the gospel in the world."

Let's pray.

God, I want to pray all these things over every person who's listening right now. I pray for some who may never have trusted in Jesus, who have not yet become followers of Jesus, that today they would text this number on the screen to experience for the first time Your love, mercy and grace, drinking from the nourishment You alone can give. I pray for the other end of the spectrum—people who have been walking with You for decades—that You would nourish them in a fresh way today.

And for every person who's listening right now, I pray for increasing intimacy with You. Help us all to grow in humility before You. We pray for Your strength over every single person who's listening right now. I pray for Your joy over every person listening. I pray for wisdom and courage. God, I pray for rest. I pray that You would help us to lock arms with each other in creative ways, that we would spend concentrated time alone with You each day, that we would encourage each other in every way we can to

thrive together during these days through connection with one another. We pray that You would use us to lead people to Jesus in ways that spread far from where we are.

O God, we give thanks in all circumstances. We thank You for the moment we find ourselves in, with all of its challenges. We thank You because You are with us. You have not left us alone. And we say together, we need Your water every single day. We praise You for Your promise to give us what we need. We pray all these things together in Jesus' name. And all God's people said, "Amen."

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