

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Watching the openings of Vacation Bible school, hearing the teachers teach the Bible lessons, observing all of the volunteers, it hit me. God uses Vacation Bible school to introduce the concept of God to all of these young children. The entire week was God oriented. The children's lives and hearts were wide open to learn about God and how God showed his perfect love to these children by sending Jesus. They learned that Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead so we will never have to die. Eternal life through Jesus is a real thing and they heard about it all week long with words and stories that were communicated at their level. This was my honest thought this week. I wish every adult in this church could hear what the children heard. The Good News given to the children built us adults up, the volunteers and all involved.

Day 1. "God loves you no matter what." The Bible verse for the Day Psalm 89:2, "*Your unfailing love will last forever.*" The theme and Bible verse were backed up by a video, music, and a teaching and all this before 9:30 in the morning. These young children have lived through a time like no other. Studies of all sorts are stating what is occurring in their lives brought on by the pandemic. To say the least, no other age group has had to face such difficult days since the flu of 1918. It has stunted emotional maturity, inhibited social and relational skills, curtailed intellectual and academic talent, impacting them negatively in other ways that are still being discovered. In my opinion their lives were turned upside down with no end in sight.

The first day's theme, "God loves you no matter what" is exactly what these young people need to hear, digest, take in, understand, and accept. When you know with absolute certainty that God loves you, you can make it through anything. "Yes, you are loved with an everlasting love and yes, underneath are the everlasting arms." When your life is built on the foundation of God's love there is no storm that can do you in or destroy you." God's love is his undergirding in your life. His love braces you up, holds you up. There is no pit so deep that God's love isn't deeper still.

For adults, these days and for young people, try to get a counseling appointment. It takes months to find a counselor that has an open appointment and several months to get an appointment with any psychiatrist for medications to be prescribed. Not only are the children dealing with so many emotions without the tools to deal with them, but their parents also faced and are facing issues that none of us are prepared for.

Every day, the children heard as one leader put it, “We all needed to hear this during Covid.” God’s unfailing love will last forever. God’s perfect love is a great prescription for battling overwhelming and paralyzing fear. For every struggle that comes our way, there is always something good of God to be learned, relearned, and experienced. And the best lessons most often come through struggles. God’s unfailing love never ends.

During the dark days of covid our lives were put through severe tests. Those who had matured more in Christ, those who knew the love of God ever so deep had advantages over those who had not grown in the love of God over the years. Spiritual growth is not something you ever want to put off. When the time of testing comes, we truly see what we are made of. And the persons who were affected the most are younger in age.

Examples were given that God loves them even when they do things that are naughty. I won’t list those examples, but the fact is God loves you no matter what. Romans 5:5 in The Living Paraphrase Bible **Romans 5:5 (TLB)** “⁵ Then, when that happens, we are able to hold our heads high no matter what happens and know that all is well, for we know how dearly God loves us, and we feel this warm love everywhere within us because God has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.” (To those who cringe when I use the Living Paraphrase, I say this, “Na, Na, Na, Na Na to you.”) When God pours it in. it is free-flowing and a large quantity (R.C. Sproul, Knowing God, pg. 106). We are inundated with His love. The NEB, “God’s love has flooded our innermost heart.”

I can't think of a more important time in the last 100 years to have your children and grandchildren in church, Sunday school, Vacation Bible School, youth group, confirmation, Christian camps, and whatever else is offered for their growth in Christ. It is maturing in Christ that gives children and adults the resilience needed to endure the most difficult of times.

1. Our fears dissipate in the love of God. You can let go of trying to control the uncontrollable for God is trustworthy for everything even when life is most difficult. 1

John 4:16 (NLT2) *¹⁶ We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love.*

Day 2. "God is with you everywhere." The Bible verse for the day. **Joshua 1:9 (NLT2)** *"For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."* In the opening, the two leaders tied a balloon to their arms that rose into the air. Tied to the arm, no matter where each one went, the balloon stayed with them. There was nowhere to get away from the balloon, representing God's Presence. You can't even hide from God's Presence. God is with you wherever you go.

The fuller context of this verse goes like this, **Joshua 1:9 (NLT2)** *⁹This is my command - be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD, your God is with you wherever you go.*" Moses had died and Joshua was now the new leader to take his place. Friends, we may all find ourselves in places or positions that we feel we are not prepared for at all. God has specific circumstances that he wants us to conquer.

Joseph's brothers wanted to kill him but sold him into slavery instead. The brothers hated Joseph because their father, Jacob, favored him more than the other 11. Joseph found himself as head of Potiphar's residence and ends up in jail due to no fault of his own. Sitting there in a prison cell, Joseph easily could have thought, "Serving God didn't work out so well, did it? I'm honest. I work hard. I didn't give in to the advances of that woman, and where did it get me? In prison" (Greg Laurie devo for 6/24/22). The Bible says,

Genesis 39:23 (ESV) ⁴²³ *The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the LORD was with him. And whatever he did, the LORD made it succeed.* In prison of all places, the Presence of the Lord was with Joseph and Joseph excelled and conquered the horrors of being in prison due to this one fact. *"The Presence of the Lord was with him."*

Jesus has promised never to leave us nor forsake us. When your life is centered in Christ, your greatest trial can be used of God for your greatest gain for the Lord God is with you wherever you go. **Romans 8:37 (ESV)** ³⁷ *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. As we grow more mature in Christ, Christ builds up within us a certain resilience.* **2. You are able to stand tall when everything around you wants to knock you flat.**

Day 3. "God is in charge." The Bible verse of the day. **Psalms 147:5 (NLT2)** ⁵ *How great is our Lord! His power is absolute!* When you hear the word God, what comes to your mind immediately? It is our knowledge of God and only God that gives meaning to life. True life is only found in God. God is the author of life. God put you on this earth for God's purposes. And one of those main purposes is to know how great God is. God's is greater than anything or anyone on this earth. This world dwarfs us but God dwarfs this world (Packer pg. 77). **3. God's greatness is our invitation to worship God weekly with God's people** (Ibid. pg. 73). God has unlimited dominion over His creatures. Dr Packer writes, "Living becomes [an awesome adventure] when you realize that you spend every moment of your life in the sight and company of an omniscient [all-knowing], omnipresent [present everywhere], Creator. God's wisdom is unlimited as is His Presence and His power."

It is our understanding of God that keeps us going when things like Covid hit and turns our lives upside down. Again, I know of no other time in the last 100 years for our children and grandchildren to be growing in God. The world cannot give them what they need; only God can.

Day 4. “God is stronger than anything.” The Bible verse of the day. **Romans 8:38 (NLT2)**

38 And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. It is on Day 4 where the heart of the Gospel is presented to the children. They heard of Jesus’ death on the cross for their sins and they learn of His resurrection from the dead. They learn that God loves them so much that He gave Jesus so that as they believe in Jesus, they will never die but will have eternal life. God is stronger than death. God is stronger than anything.

Friends, when you focus on God’s unlimited strength, you learn deep within that God literally has everything that you need. There is no need too great for God to address. God may not give us what we want but when we have and feel God’s strength within, God is able to do great things through us. The Bible tells us that our weakness shows us how much we need God’s strength in our lives. It is okay to admit weakness for that is opening yourself up to experience God’s inner strength for God is stronger than anything.

It is on day 4 that the children learn the sinner’s prayer. **Lord Jesus, thank you for dying on the cross for my sins. Please forgive me my sins and come into my life. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.**

Day 5. God is surprising.” The verse of the day. **Psalm 66:5 (NLT2)** *5 Come and see what our God has done, what awesome miracles he performs for people!*

The children learned the Joseph story. Day 5 is the day that Joseph is reunited with his family. From the pit sold into slavery, from the prison cell and chosen to be 2nd in command of Egypt, God worked wonders in Joseph’s life for God is a God of surprises.

We live in a fallen world and daily we see and hear and experience things we would rather not. We see political turmoil and there is also turmoil at home with neighbors, coworkers, and even members of your own family. Sometimes we think things could not get worse and then they do. Of this I know to be true, God has His ways of turning things around in your life. God surprises you with something incredibly good and you think, I never knew life could be this good.

Joseph was in prison and then God promoted him to a position no one saw coming. His dysfunctional family was reunited in love. Talk about a surprise. “Hey Dad, Joseph is still alive.” It is believed how it is written in Hebrew that Jacob was so surprised at the news that he had a mild stroke. **Genesis 45:26-28 (KJV)** ²⁶And told him, saying, Joseph is yet alive, and he is governor over all the land of Egypt. And Jacob's heart fainted, for he believed them not. ²⁷And they told him all the words of Joseph, which he had said unto them: and when he saw the wagons which Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of Jacob their father revived: ²⁸ And Israel said, It is enough; Joseph my son is yet alive: I will go and see him before I die.

Psalm 37:4 (NIV) ⁴ Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. There are times when God surprises you. Something occurs in your life and deep down you did not even know you desired it, but God knows the depths of your heart. God knows your deepest desires. When we literally enjoy God, enjoy being with God, enjoy knowing God, and enjoy being known by God, surprises from God come your way. God is so good.

God loves you no matter what. God is with you everywhere. God is in charge. God is stronger than anything. God is surprising. Amen and Amen.