

Learning to Lean

M. W. Bassford, 4-21-13

Toward the end of last quarter, Joe wasn't feeling well one Wednesday evening and asked me to step in and teach the adult Bible class in his absence. At that point, the class had reached the story of Hezekiah and the Assyrian invasion. In particular, we were looking at 2 Kings 19:1-2. I expected the discussion of this passage to be fairly limited. The application that I saw was that we should bring our problems to God and to our brethren, and I thought we would talk about that for a few minutes, and then move on to the rest of the lesson.

However, as those of you who were there can attest, that's not at all the way things turned out. Instead, we ended up spending half an hour discussing that application, and when I made the point that we should trust our brethren with our problems, someone asked, "Can you preach a sermon on how to do that?" I resolved to do so at the next opportunity, which turned out to be today. Let's consider this morning, then, how we can learn to lean.

The Need to Lean

To begin with, let's explore why it is that we need to lean on somebody in the first place. Generally, we need to seek support from others because of **OUR INABILITY** to make it on our own without help. In this vein, let's look at Jeremiah 10:23. Jeremiah speaks specifically here of our need to seek direction from God, but the point is applicable too to our need for one another. If we think that we can make it through this life alone, we are sadly mistaken.

However, many millions of people try to accomplish exactly that. In the modern-day US, we value traits like self-reliance and rugged individualism. We often consider an admission of weakness or need to be a shameful thing. What's more, our pride is compounded by our isolation. This is evident in, among other things, the floor plans of houses built today versus houses built 50 years ago. Gone are the formal living rooms, formal dining rooms, places where we would entertain guests. Instead, they've been replaced by palatial master bedroom suites, places where we don't spend time with anybody but us. In point of fact, most Americans don't entertain much. Most Americans don't have close friends, unless we count the TV and the Internet as friends. Most Americans haven't built the kind of relationships that will sustain them when they begin to fail. We don't want to turn to others for help, and even if we wanted to, we can't.

Nonetheless, we will always need help, and we will always need it in part because of **OUR WEAKNESS**. Paul testifies to his own weakness in 2 Corinthians 12:7-9. This passage tells us something that we often fail to appreciate about the way that God works in our lives. We know that sometimes bad things happen to us randomly, simply because we live in a world that has been marred from the very beginning by sin. We know that sometimes bad things happen because we have brought them on ourselves through our wickedness, and God allows us to suffer to chastise us.

This verse, though, points out a third reason why bad things happen. Nothing in this text indicates that God was punishing Paul. However, God knew that Paul was going to have a problem with pride because of the visions that he had seen, and so God allowed this messenger from Satan to torment him and keep him humble. God permitted him to suffer physically so that he would gain a spiritual benefit, so that he would be forced to remember his reliance on God.

Most of us like to feel with-it, in control of our lives. However, most of us **DON'T** actually feel like we're in control. Instead, there are all these problems and crises springing up around us constantly, and we come to the end of each day worn to a frazzle because we're trying to do it all. There's a saying that goes, "God will never give us more than we can handle." I think it would be more accurate to say that sometimes God intentionally **DOES** give us more than we can handle, that He piles so much on our plate that we **HAVE** to look beyond ourselves for help, because He knows that we are proud and stubborn and otherwise won't learn the lesson that we are limited. When we keep trying to fight through, when we keep trying to do it all despite abundant evidence that we can't, we only prove that we aren't listening.

It is also true that we need to learn to lean because of **OUR FOOLISHNESS**. Daniel makes an important point about wisdom in Daniel 2:19-20. The list of entities in this universe who are truly wise is short. In fact, it's got one name on it, and the name is "God". Solomon was one of the wisest men ever to live, yet he blundered spectacularly in marrying all kinds of foreign women who turned his heart away from the Lord. If Solomon and his divinely granted wisdom could make mistakes like that, what does that say about our capacity for sound judgment? As I've told several of you, two weeks ago, when I was preaching a meeting for the brethren in West Allis, I stayed at home and drove back and forth to Milwaukee every day. That's a four-hour round trip, so over the course of the week, I spent 20 hours by myself in the car. I'm not a radio listener or an audiobooks guy, so that was 20 hours alone with my thoughts, and let me tell you, in 20 hours, you can think through A LOT of stuff! I revisited a lot of the decisions that I've made in times past, and a lot of the time, I reached the conclusion that I made the wrong decision. I'm sure by that the next time I have 20 hours alone with my thoughts, I will have made plenty more bad decisions to second-guess. No matter how wise or clever I get to feeling, wisdom still belongs to the Lord, not to me. The same thing is true for every single one of us.

Finally, we need to lean because of **OUR SIN**. Let's look at the language Paul uses in Romans 5:6-8. As I was studying this text, I was reminded of something that Marky likes to do. He loves music, he often sees me sitting at the

desktop downstairs working on hymns, and so when I'm called away from the computer and not around to supervise, he will scurry over and start banging on keys. By the time I get back, the hymn often looks like someone has sneezed sixteenth notes all over the screen. These are often hymns I've spent months or years working on, hundreds of hours of labor covered with musical graffiti. Thankfully for the safety of Marky's scrawny little neck, Finale has an Undo function. When I see his handiwork, I simply roll my eyes and Control-Z the hymn back to the way it was when I left.

When it comes to sin, though, we don't have Control-Z. If all we've got is ourselves and the memory of the evil we have done, we are stuck. All we can do is admit, "Yes, that is my evil deed, and it came out of my evil heart." That guilt, and the sure knowledge that God is just and will punish the wicked, must drive us to seek help from someone else.

Leaning on Jesus

Now that we've seen that we need help with our weakness, foolishness, and sin, let's look at why, when we're burdened with those things, it's appropriate to lean on Jesus. As is often the case, this study will help us to prepare for the Lord's Supper. First, we can be assured that Jesus will help us because of **HIS NATURE**. The Scripture reveals what Jesus was like even before He came to earth in Hebrews 2:14-15. Over the past week, I've spent a lot of time, as I'm sure many here have, following the tragedy of the Boston Marathon bombings. In this grim story, one of the bright spots is the behavior of the courageous bystanders who rushed to help the injured despite the possibility that another bomb would explode. In many cases, when people like this are interviewed after the fact, they will say something like, "I didn't think. I just reacted," and sometimes it is easier to do the right thing when we don't have time to weigh our actions beforehand.

That wasn't Jesus' situation. Instead of being confronted with a split-second decision, He had all of eternity to consider whether He really, really wanted to suffer for a pack of rebels. He didn't only have to surrender an illusion of safety. Instead, He had to empty Himself of His divinity and become like one of His creations if He wanted to help. Instead of facing the possibility of harm, He faced the certainty of a gruesome, humiliating death. And yet, even though the price of goodness was so much higher, Jesus unhesitatingly put on flesh and blood to help us.

That's who Jesus is. There are so many different ways we could describe Him, but one of the simplest, yet most meaningful descriptions is, "Jesus is somebody who loves us and wants to help." We can trust somebody like that.

Similarly, we can rely on Jesus because of **HIS EXPERIENCES**. The Hebrews writer lays out the importance of those experiences in Hebrews 5:8-9. As human beings, we often acknowledge that observing something and experiencing it are two different things. I've always known that it's hard on people when their mothers die, but until my mother died, and I had to spend the next year grappling with it, I never really understood just how hard it was.

This passage is so fascinating because it tells us that the same thing applies to God. When Jesus became flesh and dwelt among us, somebody who was omniscient started learning things. It was one thing for Jesus to be perched on His nice comfy throne in heaven and watch the struggles of people who were trying to serve God. It was another thing for Him to be down in the mud and the blood and the stink, having to suffer in His own body if He wanted to please God. Jesus did obey. His spirit did win the final victory over His flesh. However, it wasn't easy, and the experience gave Him a whole new understanding of why we often don't choose to obey. He sympathizes with us because He's been there.

Conversely, that makes it easier for us to come to Him. Who of us would want to deal directly with the Father without Jesus acting as our Mediator? God doesn't get sin. He can't even be tempted. When we do sin, He regards us with the same mixture of bafflement and disgust that I feel when I find Marky digging around in the kitchen trash can and eating the proceeds. I mean, really! I give the boy all the good, wholesome food he's willing to eat, and yet there he is, foraging for nasty food that's bad for him. Does our sin make any more sense than that to our Creator? It does to Jesus. He never did those vile, disgusting, evil things, but from the days of His flesh, He understands why somebody might.

Third, we can go to Jesus for help because of **HIS PROMISE**. Read with me from Hebrews 13:5. There are several passages in the Old Testament that are quoted repeatedly in the New Testament. This one is the opposite. This guarantee was made to Jacob, to the Israelites, to Joshua, and to Solomon, and from this, the Hebrews writer wants us to conclude that it applies to every one of God's people. Lots of people make promises like this and then let us down. I myself am wary of making promises because I know that despite the best of intentions, I still let people down, and I would rather under-promise and over-perform than over-promise and under-perform. God and Jesus, however, don't have to worry about over-promising. God is faithful the way that water is wet. It is impossible for Him to be otherwise. If we are His people, then, we can be certain that He will always, always, always be there for us, provided that we remember to turn to Him. It may be that every other friend in our lives lets us down. God won't.

Finally, we can lean on the Lord because of **HIS POWER**. One aspect of this power appears in Hebrews 7:25. As all of you know, I'm much more a college-sports fan than a pro-sports fan, and one of the characteristics of college sports is that a player can only play on the team for as long as he is in college—four playing seasons, tops.

Jesus, on the other hand, remains as heavenly high priest forever. He is always there to make intercession for us, and He always will be. There is literally no force in heaven or on earth that can unseat Jesus until His work is done, and

there is no force that can keep Him from doing His work. So it is that through Him, we can have salvation to the uttermost and help to the uttermost. Everything we need in this life or the life to come, we can get from Jesus.

Before the Lord's Supper, then, let's reflect on two things. First, let's remember how wonderful it is to have a Savior like Jesus. Life is hard. We face all kinds of burdens that are too heavy for us to lift by ourselves. In Jesus, though, we have a helper who is able to lift them and not only willing, but eager to give us the help we need.

Second, now that we've considered the Lord we have to lean on, let's ask ourselves if we're leaning on Him the way we should. Are we seeking His help through the difficult times of our lives, or are we trying to tough it out on our own? Do we pray before we make a complex decision, or do we trust in our own wisdom? Do we bring our sins to the cross, or do we trust in our own righteousness? Let's examine ourselves in these things as we partake.

Leaning on One Another

During the last part of our study together this morning, we're going to examine the second and most difficult way we need to lean: leaning on one another. In us, this has to begin when we **ABANDON THE FAÇADE** of perfection that so many of us construct so painstakingly. I have to be honest, friends. This point took a lot of soul-searching and reflection from me, because if we were to construct a list of the neurotic perfectionists at Joliet, my name would be on that list. When I write a hymn, for instance, I'm not satisfied if the hymn is merely well written. Instead, it must be perfectly written, so smooth that it appears effortless, even though it is the result of great effort. I might spend years agonizing over every word, but nothing of that struggle is permitted to appear in the final product.

More generally, I would like everything about my life to appear effortlessly perfect. I will gladly help other Christians when they ask, but before asking somebody else to do the exact same thing for me, I agonize. And yet, my determination to maintain this façade isn't about anybody else. It's about me. I know that none of my friends at Joliet or anywhere else expect me to be perfect. Incidentally, if you do have people in your life who expect you to be perfect, imagine them with a giant blinking neon sign over their heads that reads, "My opinion is worthless and should be disregarded!". God doesn't demand that we be perfect. What gives them the right to expect more than the Creator?

As a rule, I find that Christians generally are understanding, forgiving people. My demons lie inward, in the conviction that I am a deeply unworthy person, but that if I somehow manage to be perfect, that will prove that I'm not.

For all of us who find ourselves in this trap, maybe the key to getting out lies in 1 Corinthians 2:3-5. Paul, for all of his greatness of spirit, was a deeply flawed man, just like the rest of us. Unlike most of us, though, he was very open about that fact. He was OK with his imperfections, because his message, and his life generally, weren't about him. They were about Jesus. He didn't have to justify himself because Christ had already justified him. That's a point that all of us need to reach. We need to let go of all of our futile attempts to prove our own worth and accept the value that Jesus assigned us when He shed His blood for us on the cross. It's good for us to strive. It's good for us to achieve. However, those things shouldn't be part of some miserable quest to earn our own glory. They should be to glorify God.

Second, we must **LEARN TO TRUST** one another. Often, Christians talk about this like it's some big mystery, but in reality, it's not very mysterious at all. As far as I know, the only way to get to trust is described in Acts 2:46. A lot of those commandments that involve trust that we find so hard to carry out are written to Christians in a very different situation than ours, Christians who knew each other extremely well because they were around each other all the time. I think it's fair to say that most of us don't know each other that way. We chit-chat after services, we talk at potlucks, we read status updates on FB, but that's not enough time for real, genuine understanding. Let me give you an example: I've known Jesse and Goldia ever since I moved here, but this past year, Jesse had some health problems that kept him home from services, and so I began to visit them for an hour every Friday afternoon as I do with some of the other shut-ins. In that hour of visiting per week for a couple of months, I learned all kinds of things from them and about them, and I suspect they would say the same thing about me. That time didn't lead me to think any less of them, but it sure did give me a different and richer appreciation for who they are. Until we spend the time to gain that rich appreciation for one another, any trust we advance can only be forced and artificial. We have to get to know one another first.

Once we've done that, it becomes much easier to **SOLICIT PRAYERS** from one another. Consider Paul's advice in Colossians 4:3-4. There are times when we can help directly with one another's problems. No one's going to confuse me with the Incredible Hulk, but I can still help load a moving van. On the other hand, if you've got heart trouble, and you're going to need surgery, do not invite me to wield the knife! However, there is one way we can always help, and that's through prayer. This should apply not only to the difficulties that we'll put in the bulletin, hospitalizations and such, but to the more embarrassing areas of our lives, the things that reveal that we are imperfect people. There's a boatload of problems that aren't even spiritual problems that we're ashamed of and unwilling to mention to our brethren, and so we deny ourselves the help that their prayers would bring. I'm sure that amuses the devil, but it doesn't really do much good for us. It's okay to have flaws, and it's okay to ask for help from our brethren.

Of course, the same principle applies when we are struggling with spiritual problems. We need to **CONFESS OUR SINS** to one another. As many of us already know, this is clearly taught in James 5:16. This one is probably in the

Top Ten List for commandments most disobeyed by Christians. I have to acknowledge that I struggle with this one too. When I confess sins, they tend to be the past-tense kind of sins that I've moved past and don't need help with anymore, rather than the present-tense kind of sins that I do need help with, but that make me look bad. Once again, this is a time and trust issue. If we don't feel comfortable sharing our spiritual problems, that's probably a sign that we shouldn't, but it's probably also a sign that we need to associate with our brethren more, until we DO get to feeling comfortable. Once we know somebody well enough to know that they won't burn us if we confess, being open becomes a whole lot easier. Also, confession in this text is a two-way street. Honesty and openness works both ways, so that the result isn't one Christian with problems and one Christian with no problems, but two flawed people trying to get to heaven.

Finally, if a brother or sister is looking to lean on us, we need to remember to **BE KINDHEARTED**. Peter advises exactly this in 1 Peter 3:8. Inevitably, whenever the subject of confessing our sins to one another comes up in Bible class, somebody observes that it's a nice theory, but when we try it in practice, our dirty laundry ends up spread all over the congregation. I've never done that to anybody, and I've never had anybody do it to me, but I'm sure it happens, and when it does, it suggests a sketchy relationship. It's not that there's one flawed Christian and one flawless Christian there; it's that there are two flawed Christians, and one of them isn't being honest about his flaws, who is so wrapped up in the let's-pretend façade that he gossips about his brother's failings, as though it's news that a Christian HAS failings.

Brethren, that's not the way to repay our brother's trust. Even if his particular struggle isn't one we've faced ourselves, there are sure to be other areas of life where we don't measure up to God's standards. We need to bring that understanding of our own fallibility to the way we deal with the fallibility of others.