

## **Looking Back So We Can Move Forward**

We have arrived at the last Sunday of 2008. It seems the months have flown by. There have been lots of changes and significant events in our lives, some of which happened so quickly they seem like a blur to me. Believe it or not, like it or not, time has advanced, we have aged, and the year 2008 is almost entirely spent. Next Sunday morning we will plunge headlong into a brand new year that will be bright with potential and possibilities. Before we do, however, I want us to look back and make some observations about the year we've just had. I know that too much introspection can at times be unhealthy, but I think it can help us to consider the year we've had and to note the lessons we've learned.

If you attended the services all through 2008 then you heard me preach almost 90 times, not including the 13 funerals and several weddings I preached this past year. (That represents about 600 pages of notes). As with most years we said goodbye to some very precious friends and saints of God and we welcomed some precious new borns into our family. We saw people saved and baptized in the Holy Spirit. We heard testimonies of lives changed and bodies healed. We saw people come through the fire with their faith strengthened and shining and sadly we saw some folks who gave up mid-journey and abandoned their walk with the Lord. It grieves me to think of those who lost their way on this journey of faith.

We saw about 75 people from our church travel to a foreign country to be involved in missions and ministry and we have trips already in the works for 2009. If you would like to be part of a missions trip, see Pastor Ric Shields and he can share with you some of the upcoming opportunities for this next year.

We started this year talking about the importance of guarding our heart. We spent nine weeks last spring on the series of messages entitled "Created in His Image." We focused on the ways in which God is not at all like us in a six part series entitled "Overwhelmed by a Mighty God." The last part of this year we spent time discussing "How to Get Through Troubled Times." And we finished up the year with what for me was a shortened Advent season, talking about three strange signs and ten strange sounds of Christmas.

For some of you this has been a great year and you're sad to see it end and for

others 2009 can't get here fast enough because this has been a year full of difficulty for you and your family. You've used up all the mercy available for 2008.

It has certainly been a significant and eventful year in our nation - politically and socially as we elected the first African-American president and economically as we've watched and experienced a deepening financial crisis in America and abroad.

I called this message "Looking Back So We Can Move Forward." I think we have to do some looking back, to understand where we've been, to gain perspective on the big changes that occur as well as on the sometimes subtle changes that are occurring in our lives and in our world. By looking back, we gain the understanding, knowledge and insight we need in order to wisely, carefully, move forward. We want to make sure we choose the right path forward because as someone said, the path you choose determines your destination. We want to make sure we are choosing the right path, a godly path.

**1. Looking back enables us to see how far from God's pattern we have wandered.** Is it just me or have we moved farther than ever from the biblical pattern for life and society? It seems to me the past few years have moved us noticeably farther away from God's order, from biblical morality and biblical authority, and even farther from just plain common sense.

Let me try to explain what I'm talking about. The bible says there is a way that seems right to a man but the end of that way is death. It is saying to us that we can live our life the way we choose, without consideration of God and his word and his instruction, and if we do, that path leads to death. Eternal death in fact. But there is a path we can choose that pleases God, that is obedient to his word, that follows his instruction and that path leads to God and to eternal life.

What's happened over the years is that we have moved farther and farther away from God's order, from God's path, from the choices that are pleasing to God as revealed in the bible.

Think of it like this. Suppose I cut a piece of lumber and I mark the dimensions using a ruler or tape measure. The piece I cut is almost exactly the measurement I need. I say almost exactly because there will be a tiny, perhaps imperceptible difference from the exact measurement of the tape measure I used. And let's suppose

I need to cut 2,000 of these to the exact same length and specifications. But suppose instead of using the tape measure to determine where to make the cut on the second one, I just place the first one on top of the second board and use it as my pattern, my measure for marking. What happens? It's just a tiny bit off from the first cut and just a tiny bit off from the tape measure, but not enough to make any real difference. Then I use this second board as my pattern for the third cut and I use the third board as the pattern for my fourth cut, the fourth for the fifth and so on until I've cut 2,000 of these. What do you think has happened? Eventually, after I cut out 2,000 of these the chances are the last one will be significantly different from the first one. The reason is because I stopped using the original pattern – the original measuring tape. I was trying to make the same thing, but over the generations it will change because each one is just a bit different. It is so subtle. Just tiny increments of change. Not so much that you notice it from one board to the next, from one generation to the next, but over time the changes occur and then if you compare the first board with the 2000<sup>th</sup> you see a big difference. In fact, I called Ric yesterday to see if he could figure this out for me. If you were only off 1/64<sup>th</sup> of an inch each time you cut a new board – and that's a small amount, by the time you reached the 2000<sup>th</sup> board you would be off about 2 ft. 7 inches. Moving away from the original standard over time, even if it seems so slight, makes a huge difference.

Now think of this in terms of our life and our culture. There is a pattern, a template for living our life in a way that is pleasing to God. That template or pattern is the bible. We want to fashion our life exactly according to this pattern, living according to his word, his precepts and values and worldview. If we use that pattern over and over, for every generation and for measuring every cut, every decision, then we can continue to make wise choices and all of our choices will be based upon God's word. We will walk with the blessing and favor of God upon our lives. But if we stop using God's word as our pattern, our template for life, and we start using our own ideas, we start making our life decisions based upon our measurement – our standard for happiness or success rather than on God's standard – we are going to end up with a life far different than we intended. We start basing our decisions upon ideas, upon a worldview and a philosophy that are contrary to God's ways, and though the changes

may be tiny at first, over time, over the generations, the changes become significant until finally the last product – the last generation will be nothing like the original.

We can look back at 2008 and say, “I don’t think culturally we’ve changed much. I don’t think we’ve changed much in the past ten or twenty years.” But when we measure the changes against the original pattern of God’s word, we can see just how far we are from God’s word, from God’s commands, from God’s pattern for living, from a Christian worldview.

Evangelical Christians’ views on abortion, on gay marriage, on living together before marriage, on no-fault divorce, on euthanasia, on embryonic stem cell research, on cloning, on assisted suicide, the list could go on and on, but the position of so many Christians on these issues is being determined by every other voice except the one we should be listening to – the one who speaks from the original pattern for living. We should be listening to God’s voice as revealed through his word. That is our pattern rather than just basing our decisions on what we want, on whatever is convenient, on whatever is politically correct or acceptable.

When we determine that we are going to live our lives according to God’s word and his pattern, it has an effect on every decision and every issue. What we believe about God and his word determines our view of the world and determines our understanding of who we are as human beings. What we believe about God and creation determines how we view ourselves as human beings and that must effect our position on abortion, euthanasia, stem cell research and so much more. Listen to what Chuck Colson wrote about human dignity this past week.

“...the question of human dignity is at the root of virtually every major question facing humans today. Not just bioethics, but also medicine, the economy and the environment. And the question of human dignity hangs on the answer to this question: where do humans come from? If human beings are the products of random chance, then human dignity is merely the product of our fevered imaginations. If we truly are the end result of a coincidental convergence of atomic particles, then the phrase ‘human dignity’ is meaningless. We would have no more right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness than would a mossy fern. Scientists would be free to tinker with our genetic makeup, to dispose of human embryos, to clone us and mix our DNA with animals.

Governments would be free to exercise unrestrained power over their ultimately valueless subjects. Without any basis for human dignity, life is one gigantic free-for-all – get what you can, while you can. But if the answer to the question, ‘Where do we come from?’ is ‘We were created by God,’ then the implications are truly staggering. If in fact we were created in God’s image....then every human life, from natural conception through natural death, is endowed with eternal and incomprehensible worth.”

Friends, as I look back, it seems to me we are moving farther and farther away from God’s plan. Perhaps it’s my age that is beginning to allow me a greater perspective in looking back and seeing how we have drifted from our original pattern, our original foundation. I suggest you take a look for yourself. Pay attention and see if we are drifting from God’s word and God’s standards for living. If we are, if you are, start measuring everything with God’s pattern for living and start making the move back to right choices and obedience to God’s way. Make sure your choices fit God’s pattern for life and truth.

**2. Looking back gives us a better view of where we are on God’s prophetic timetable.** Several things happened in 2008 that should remind us that time is marching on in God’s prophetic timing. This global financial crisis we are in has shown us just how close we are - how easily we could move to a one world economy – to a one world currency – to a one world government. The circumstances in the Middle East continue moving towards a showdown of some sort. Of course you saw what happened yesterday in retaliation against Hamas continuing to fire rockets into Israel. The Jerusalem Post reported this week that Russia was selling air defense missiles to Syria, Libya, Egypt, Lebanon and selling medium range and perhaps long-range missiles to Iran. They have given 10 fighter jets to Lebanon and equipped them with other military equipment. Russia continues to try to insert itself as a major power and player in the middle east. North Korea is supposedly supplying nuclear materials to several middle eastern nations. All of these things could be signs we are moving toward an end-time scenario. Every age seems to have heightened signs of the possible coming of the Lord and this age is no exception. Time could prove that 2008 was a significant year, one that will lead to major changes in our world and will move us

closer to the return of the Lord. But there is no reason to fear because,

**3. Looking back allows us to see evidence of God's faithfulness.** In spite of recession or whatever we call the crisis that has struck so many, we can testify to God's faithful provision for this church and its members. He has proven himself over and over to us. The bible declares, **"God who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord is faithful" 1 Corinthians 1:9.** Paul wrote, **"The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it." 1 Thessalonians 5:24.** The writer of Hebrews declares, **"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful." Hebrews 10:23.**

We look back and see God's faithfulness and that empowers us to take the next step forward. Hold unswervingly to the hope we have in the faithfulness of God and keep moving forward by faith. The bible doesn't say God will be faithful only in the good times. It says God is faithful. That means all the time, that means regardless of the circumstances. It is God's very nature to be faithful and he will not deny his nature. He has been faithful in the past. He was faithful to us throughout 2008 and we can move forward into 2009 with confidence that God will be faithful to us every moment of every day of the coming new year.

**4. Looking back allows us to see evidence of God's all sufficient grace.** For some folks, 2008 has been a year of tragedy, loss, illness, economic setback, loss of job or health or marriage. Some have made terrible mistakes, poor choices, you've failed ethically or morally. Regardless, if you have come to Christ in humility, in repentance, in faith, you have found that his grace is all sufficient and his mercy is new every morning. You've found that God will still love you in spite of your earthen vessel frailty and failure. The Lord told Paul, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." 2 Corinthians 12:9**

Some of you have experienced situations this year that left you exhausted, spent, too tired, too discouraged, too saddened, too overwhelmed, and you didn't see how you were going to make it. Somehow you got up, reached down one more time, perhaps expecting to feel the bottom and instead, what you felt was God's all sufficient grace. What you experienced was God's gentle touch, the reassurance of His abiding presence, the reminder that the comforter, the Holy Spirit has come along side you to

strengthen you and enable you and empower you to press on.

I have no idea what 2009 will hold for any of us, but I know this, 2009 will be full of God's amazing grace at work in each of our lives, every moment of every day as we trust him and lean upon him. Don't get too worried about what the future holds. Stop and look back for just a moment. Can't you see the evidence of his grace everywhere? Can't you see how his grace kept you and lifted you and sustained you and redeemed every situation? The songwriter said, "tis grace has brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home. The Lord has promised good to me, His word my hope secures; he will my shield and portion be as long as life endures." Wherever we are headed in 2009, God's grace is already ahead of us and will be there to lead us safely through and carry us safely home. I know it because I can trace his grace through every day of 2008.

**5. Looking back reminds us the trials of 2008 did not destroy us!** Stop and consider all the devil tried to throw at you over this past year. He tried subtle temptation and direct assaults. He tried fatigue, he tried to wear you down, to discourage you, to confuse you, to blind you to God's truth. He tried to convince you the church was unnecessary, irrelevant. He told you your faith was weak, that it wouldn't make any difference. He told you to give up, there was no hope, God's not real after all. But you are still here. Nothing he tried stopped you. Nothing he said convinced you. All the trials he released against you, all the trouble he brought at you, it didn't destroy you. You didn't know you could make it but you did. You're stronger now than you were 12 months ago. And you can look ahead without fear. You've looked back and seen that all the devil can throw at you can't destroy you, it can't separate you from God or his love and grace. How do I know for sure?

The bible says, "**Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?** [ The Message translates this "Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way!"] **Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,**

**will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

**Romans 8:35-39**

2008 didn't destroy you and 2009 can't destroy you either so get ready to move forward in the new year. Not only did the trials of 2008 not destroy you, in fact,

**6. Looking back shows us God is miraculously causing all the events of 2008 to work together for our good.** The apostle Paul tells us **“And we know that in all**

**things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called**

**according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28.** Can you believe that as you face a brand new year? Can you see it as you look back on 2008?

God causes all things to work together for our good. Even those things that were intended for evil and for our harm, God has the power to turn them around for good in our life. Often that depends upon our choices, our willingness to cooperate with the Holy Spirit and to live according to his word, choosing to walk in obedience to his will, choosing to submit our life to him each and every day. Walking with God in obedience brings with it the blessing and favor of God. Your choice to obey God gives him the material to work with in turning all things to good.

I don't know what 2008 was like for you, but I know God was at work in your life in 2008. I know he was interested in you, he cared about you, he provided for you and he never left you, not for one second. I know that for certain and because I can look back and see that, I can then move forward into 2009 with confidence that God is already there, smoothing out the rough places, setting up places along the way where we can rest safely, making provision for our every need.

Tonight we are going to prayerfully say goodbye to 2008 and leave behind anything that needs to be left behind. But this morning, let's take a moment to look back with gratitude for God's faithfulness, for his grace, for his work in our lives and then let's determine to walk into this new year full of faith and confidence in God and all he has prepared for us. Let's determine that we are going to live our lives according to his standard and not our own. We don't want to move away from the template of God's word.