

From Section 3: Delighting in God's People

*"As for the saints who are in the land,
they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight." Psalm 16:3*

Sheep Blessings

"He has made everything beautiful in its time." Ecclesiastes 3:11, ESV

"Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the Lord's work, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." --1 Corinthians 15:58, CSB

"Your labor in the Lord is not in vain." There are few words that are more encouraging to people who give their lives to the ministry, like our husbands and ourselves. But is it really true? Is it all worth it? 40+years of ministry certainly has made a believer out of me! Not only has He richly blessed our church and our family in many ways, but He has turned every trial into gold. I'd like to share with you some of both.

Blessing upon Blessing

1. Marriage Partners in the Gospel

Every Christian married couple are partners in the gospel, but being marriage partners in ministry has made the need for that partnership even more necessary and richer. It can be sobering to realize that your marriage and family are to provide godly examples for other church members.

It can be humbling as you see them learning as much from your struggles as your strengths. But it is an added incentive to keep on loving each other and to work through your difficulties. And, doing so in front of church members makes it not only a blessing to your own family, but to so many others. They get to see how God takes two sinful, very different individuals, with their own desires, strengths and weaknesses be unified by their love for God.

They get to watch God transform you increasingly into a picture of Christ with His bride, the Church. Watching that miracle unfold in you gives them hope that the same God who gives grace to your marriage can give grace to theirs.

2. Tethered to the Teacher

No one in a classroom is taught more than the teacher. No one is preached to more than the preacher.

As our husbands spent time preparing to preach, to teach a Sunday School class, to counsel a member on a difficult situation, or to comfort them as they suffer, they grow in God's Word. That regular, intense study time will not only be used by the Lord in the lives of those they pastor, but also in their lives and in their families' lives.

We, too, as many come to us for counsel and comfort, will have many opportunities to study God's Word deeply for His answers to their situation and find what we need not only to help them, but treasure for our own souls, too. Being married to the ministry has brought us both a greater appreciation and knowledge of the riches in God's Word.

3. The Prayers and Comfort of the Saints

Sometimes I dread the scrutiny of being married to the pastor. There was one Sunday when I was sitting all the way in the back of the balcony, about as opposite of a location to center stage as you can get in our church. Mark made a comment about me in his sermon and suddenly most of the congregation rubber-necked to look back at me to see my response. I couldn't believe it! It's at times like these that I'm reminded that many members are mindful not just of Mark, but of me and the rest of the family.

While those incidences are not my favorite version of congregational mindfulness, I have to say that they have been far outweighed by the mindfulness of our members to pray for our whole family. Rarely a Sunday passes when someone doesn't come up to me and tell me that they are praying for us as a family. Some even continue to pray for our children who have married and moved away long ago.

On top of that, many pray regularly for Mark to pastor well and to preach well. We feel so pampered, and Mark feels so empowered by the prayers of the saints! And if that weren't enough, their words of comfort and acts of kindness that have encouraged and sustained us through many hard times. Oh, how beautiful it is when the saints love one another! And what a blessing it is that God turns scrutiny into a blessing for pastors and their families.

4. Sweet Friendships

Pastors and their wives might have to be careful with whom they make deep friendships, but when those friends are found, they are such a blessing. Some of our good friendships have come from the church members. Many have come from the men and their wives who pastor/elder alongside us. Covenanting together to love each other, ministering together for the gospel, encouraging one another to grow in Christ, and even suffering together for His name has forged strong bonds.

I have no doubt that God would have provided friendships for my husband and I if he wasn't in the ministry; but I also do not doubt that working alongside others in the ministry itself has been an important part of the blessing of friendships that we have both enjoyed.

5. Adopted Family

God's people have been adopted family to us. We have had older, godly couples be like parents and grandparents to us. Years after they have departed this life, their wisdom cheers us on. We have had the blessing of being adopted parents to many here in our church. Part of our Church Covenant is a promise to help each other raise up "those in our care" (i.e., children, etc) in the nourish and admonition of the Lord.

We have had the blessing of especially young adult men and women become like older brothers and sisters to our kids. Many of them have no family in the area and are happy to be included into part of our family. They have added so much to our life. And, they have been great friends to our kids, providing another close-up picture of what it means to follow Christ, in addition to good ole Mom and Dad. In Christ, we truly have not failed to receive a hundredfold of brothers, sisters, mother, father, and children as we have given our lives for the gospel. (Mark 10:30)

Bites Turned into Blessings

The suffering we go through in the ministry can be excruciating. The people who hurt us can be the very ones we thought would always be our friends and always be supporters. Now we feel betrayed or abandoned. We can feel so alone, so unappreciated. So unwanted! A heavy darkness settles in our hearts. It can be tempting to give up. But take courage! God knows and cares and is up to good! Your weak little eyes cannot see what God can see in the dark and what good He plans to do through it.

But as John Piper once said, "God is up to 1000 things at once. We might know about 3 of them." Our God is so good and really does work all things together for our good. No hurt or even evil can stand untransformed by Him. With every sheep bite, He intertwines blessings. He even turns them into blessings. God has not failed to make the very things that hurt the most, some of the times of sweetest blessing, with the Lord, with each other, and with those who supported us through them.

"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Romans 8 and Sheep Bites

"What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be[i] against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." –Romans 8:28-39

Paul is writing this letter to the Romans to encourage them to persevere even in the face of persecution from enemies of Christ. The tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword he is talking about are brought by those outside of the church, not fellow Christians. But as Paul, himself, faced from time to time, there are hurts and sin struggles within the church, too. And we can at very least speak of the good God used these difficulties to do: to give billions of Christians over thousands of years much of the New Testament Scriptures to live by and to know how to even be a church!

So, yes, I am hijacking the promises of this passage for other applications. But that beautiful phrase "all things work together of the good" leaves no situation out. God will even use our struggles with sheep in the church for our good, their good, and God's glory.

So, on we go!

1. We may feel the weight of sin and suffering of God's people more, but God uses it to grow our love for God and tenderness for God's people.

When I asked my husband what is the hardest thing he regularly deals with in our local church, he said helping them day after day with grief and loss. Death, cancer diagnoses, job loss, divorce, miscarriage, friends moving away. Most every day of every week brings sadness of this kind. This might not seem like a sheep bite, because our husbands aren't a target with this kind of mourning and grief. But it is like a bite because of all of the pain involved.

Pastors/elders feel the breadth of the sin of the people in their church because they spend so much time caring for and checking up on them. And being sinners as we all are, and living in a fallen world as we do, there is always someone (and usually multiple somebodies) who is struggling. Our shepherd husbands make it their job to know their sheep's struggles and pastor them through them.

My husband and I are not a "share all" ministry couple. There are many things that I do not know that others are struggling with. Shepherding ME well has helped us come to see my "weight" limits. There are some things my husband shares with me, some things I know from my own interactions with people and attendance in church gatherings, and there are a lot of things I do not know. Every camel can bear a certain amount of burden, and my big husband camel has a lot more capacity than me. But there are times when I get a fuller sense of how much he bears and am amazed that he can do it. There is so much sin, hurt and brokenness in just our congregation alone!

But with the burden-bearing has come a deeper love for God and for His people. God hears the prayers of all His hurting people, every moment of every day. He welcomes them to cast their burdens upon Him because He cares for them. And God doesn't merely hear them and bear them as a listener. He sent His Son to bear the full weight of it all so that we might be free!

"Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed." --Isaiah 53:4-5

"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" --1 John 3:1, NIV

Helping others through their sorrows tenderizes our hearts towards them. When I think of how tender my husband's heart is in counselling and in preaching now compared to his early years, the change is remarkable. Sharing sorrows year after year, have made him more like the compassionate shepherd and the sympathetic high priest. That has made him a better husband to me and father to our kids, as well as a more winsome pastor to the congregation. What a blessing!

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort." --2 Corinthians 1:3-7

2. We feel our weakness to lead and love, but we learn to depend upon the Lord to grow and help His church and wait for His timing in contentment.

Most men like to fix things, or at least my husband does. But unfortunately, many of the concerns people share with him can't be easily fixed by a simple word or action. Quickly, he comes to the end of himself. A pastor spends much of his day listening to people and problems that can't be easily fixed. Being in ministry is a sure-fire way to see how little you can do. That can be very discouraging, especially if your husband thought he was going into the ministry to rescue the world, or at least one little corner of it.

But the blessing of coming to the end of yourself is seeing just how dependent we are upon God. Being

faced with their inadequacy and finding God alone what is needed is great for our humility and great for our vision of how big God is. As men who regularly face their limits and must go to God and ask Him to do what they cannot do, our husbands have a great opportunity to grow their confidence in God. And this, in turn, blesses the whole congregation as their pastors comfort them with the ability of God to be enough for their circumstances.

This clinging to God as the source instead of the means of His grace is especially important for us as pastor's wives. There are many times we may be tempted to push our husbands to fix this church situation or to do more with that troubled member. We may be impatient for changes in our church and expect our husbands to be the ones to change it and change it now. While we certainly want to encourage our husbands to say or do the difficult things that need to be done in love, we need to be careful that we are not really pushing for them to rush imprudently into change because we are impatient with God's timing. Like David, we need to be praying about these situations, both for God to work out changes in His perfect timing and by whatever means He chooses—using our husbands or not, as the case may be.

Reflecting on this also helps me to rightly rely first on the Lord, rather than on my husband. I know my husband is not Superman, if for no other reason than I don't think he has ever owned any spandex, and certainly not in red and blue with a matching cape! But, sometimes my expectations of what he can do for me, look like I think he is "faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, and "able of leaping tall buildings in a single bound."

On my list of expected superhuman feats for my husband have been things like: converting our children, never making mistakes; making everyone in the congregation happy; be in all places at all time; write sermons without hours of study; protect me from all hurtful remarks or actions of others; fill all of the needs and wants of my heart; or at very least, reading my mind. A healthy admiration of our husband's abilities is one thing, but superhuman expectations are another! They are sinners like us! They need God's grace to do all that God requires them to do. They are God's good gift to the church. They are God's good gift to us and our children. But they are not a replacement for God!

I have found that taking time to remember God's truth satisfies my heart upon God rather than trying to squeeze God-sized comfort from my human-sized husband. It also helps me look to God as the one who works salvation and sanctification in His church by His Holy Spirit and His Word, rather than on the works of my husband. This puts me in a position of contentment in God that allows me to love, encourage and be grateful for my husband, rather than find him lacking most of the time.

Most pastors deal with feelings of impatience to see certain situations or people would change. Sometimes this may tempt them to say or do things rashly in an attempt to affect a change now! Sometimes God may make this attitude a bit clearer to us than it is to them. God very well may desire to use a gentle, winsome, humble word from us to help them to turn away from acting rashly and to turn back and depend upon God and His timing. Carolyn Mahaney's talk called "Watch Your Man," available online is a great resource for learning how to do this.

Our husbands and we are far from the only ones facing the temptation to hurry along a particular outcome to a long-standing problem. There will likely be many times when we will need to offer the same kind of gentle, humble winsome reminder we might offer our husbands to others in our church. We can pray with them for change in the situation but point them back to trusting God's timing and leading in changing the situation.

3. We see the power of sin in God's people, but we get a front row seat of the great things God is doing.

You know the fairy tale of the ugly duckling that turns out to be a swan? That isn't anything compared to the radical changes God brings about in each of His people!

Saved. Made New. Redeemed. Transformed. Conformed. And one day GLORIOUS! These are the powerful verbs God's Word uses to describe what He does in His people. God changes us by His Spirit at work in us. And it's the church that is the stage for seeing these amazing changes.

Now that DOES mean that there's a lot of ugly walking down our hallways. We are all sinners and while salvation comes instantly, sanctification comes slowly. Sometimes those ugly ducks do ugly, hurtful things; or, just a lot of stupid things (seeing as these ugly ducks are really sheep—animal confusion). And our husbands can get very tired and sometimes very beat up trying to care well for everyone.

But God never fails to bring His work to completion. He has promised transformation, so it will come. And guess who gets to watch His people shed their ugly and be transformed into beauty, over and over again? Our husbands and us alongside them. It is such a blessing to see the power of God at work. It gives such hope in Him. With man, much is impossible. With God, all things are possible.

"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." --2 Corinthians 3:17-18, ESV

4. We feel loneliness as people come and go, but we get to hug a parade of God's people.

CHBC is in Washington DC. Washington DC is an extremely transient city. Military people come and go every three years. Government people come and go every 2 to 4 years, a lesser doing an internship and that could be even less than a year. It's a very expensive city with not the best public-school system. So even those who are moving away because of a job, may be moving away to the suburbs for lower cost of living and better schooling for free.

Our church is reflective of our city and these church plants. One-third of our membership turns over every three years. Members are encouraged to dive right in and get deeply involved in the church and deeply involved in each other's lives. This is part of what makes our community so rich in their love and care for each other.

But it is hard to invest deeply in each other only to see a for sale sign outside their house a few years later! And not only is it so hard, but it hurts. Every time one of these close friends leaves it's like they take part of my heart with them. That's why my husband came up with the motto that loving one another at CHBC is an invitation to "hug a parade." We make the most of the time we have, but we know that we meet to part all too quickly, here in Washington DC.

Sometimes the thought of having to grow through the motion of finding new friends, growing their friendship, and getting to Jonathan yet again is exhausting. Sometimes I think I just can't do it again. I'd rather be lonely than feel the pain of losing someone else again. This takes God's unchanging, infinite love. Good thing he so powerful. Good thing he so able. He always gives more grace to go deep and to find good friends again.

But there are blessings to this parade hugging, too! God uses it to expand our ability to love like Him --fully and freely. We get to see God's faithfulness to save and transform person after person after person.

And He the transiency of our friendships to reminds us of the finiteness of this world. He holds out to us the hope of the eternal home coming where those who we met to part with will become those who we enjoy the fellowship of forever with. And there will be no parting anymore!

5. Confronting false doctrine or disunity within the church can bring strife to the congregation and anger towards our husbands, but God grows in us His heart for His glory, His people and the gospel.

“And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding. Jeremiah 3:18

Some of the most important things our husbands do as pastors is to preserve God's truth and work for the unity within our local church. Without the truth, no one can be saved. Without the truth, we have no understanding to inform our thoughts or our lives as God wants us to. Without unity, the Church's clear witness to Christ and the gospel is blurred. The gospels and the letters of the New Testament are filled pastors/elders being urged to uphold sound doctrine and to work for unity within their churches.

Why do they need to be urged to do these things? Because those in the congregation or trying to influence the congregation with false teaching are putting up a fight or the rifts of disunity are so deep felt. These matters are rarely patched up with a “let's get coffee and clear up our little points of disagreement” appointments. This is laborious work for the sake of the gospel. Oh, but when it is your very own brothers and sisters you are trying to correct or bring to unity, this becomes so painful.

What you might love to say with a gentle word is sometimes only effective with a firm rebuke—no one's favorite form of communication. Correction may be taken as arrogance and the response be hurtful rather than humble. Our husbands may be misjudged and even slandered. On top of being terrible for the church, this is so hard for our husbands and it's so hard for us. My passions flare. My mama bear is roused on my husband's account.

I think it must be my least favorite way to see my husband suffer in the ministry. But God has used these incidents to bless me with an x-ray into my own sinful heart. This heart surgery is so important! He makes me see how much I want the congregation to appreciate him. I look to them rather than look to God for approval. (Galatians 1:5)

I remember that God sees and He will reward my husband's faithfulness, even if it is not appreciated or rewarded here. It reminds me that we give ourselves first to God, then to God's people. And we give ourselves to God's people, because we have given ourselves to God. (2 Corinthians 8:5) And, as God frees us from looking primarily to man's good opinion, He frees us to do what is needed to love them better, even though it might hurt.

“To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.”--1 Peter 5:1-4, NIV

I hope recounting these blessings are an encouragement to you that no matter what your husband and you encounter in the ministry that there is nothing that God cannot and will not use for your good and His glory!