

Ezekiel 17:22-24

I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it.

The Low Made High - June 13, 2021

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This week, like most of your children or grandchildren, I am finishing school. As many of you know I am a 4th grade teacher at Bret Harte Elementary School in the Cherry Hill District. One of my assignments is to work with a group of students who are skilled in math. It's an interesting group. School is generally easy for them. They crank out their work quickly. Some of them are discipline problems because they get bored and chat or wander around while the others are doing their assignments.

That all changes in my class. One of my objectives is to expose my group of 4th graders to the academic environment they will face once they get to middle school. In elementary school, of course, there is a lot of hand-holding and individual attention. The classes are built around the teachers. Children spend six hours a day interacting with one adult, often more time than they spend with their own families. When you think back on your own school career, who are the teachers you remember the most? I expect for many of us, most of our memories are of our grade-school teachers and how they influenced our lives. I'm sure there are some middle or high school teachers we recall as being influential, but many of us can tell stories — good and bad — about how those who taught us when we were young encouraged us, inspired us, or redirected us. Of course, there were a few who may have turned us off to education, discouraged us, or even made us think badly of ourselves. If such teachers were in your life, I am very sorry. Most of the educators I have worked with care very much about their students and bend over backwards to help them.

Elementary school teachers are almost all female. Most of them are mothers themselves and yes, for better or worse, consider their classrooms extensions of their families. Some teachers are highly protective of those students who struggle socially, academically, or have other issues. Children sometimes get very cling-y and more than a few can get rather manipulative in their ability to get the teacher to overlook things or even do their work for them.

I certainly see the same dynamic working with some parents and their children when it comes to homework. There are students whose parents do the bulk of their children's homework for them. Helping and guiding is one thing, doing is quite another. Moreover, for teachers it is painfully obvious to tell whether homework has been done by a child or an adult. The problem, of course, is that the children aren't learning anything — all they are really learning is that when they have trouble, someone will bail them out. That's not a particularly good life lesson, is it?

So I come to me. Perhaps it's because I'm older, or a father, or mean and obnoxious, my approach to dealing with my students is possibly a bit different from some of my colleagues. My approach is to push the students beyond what they've been used to. For most of my kids, school has been pretty easy. So I help them realize that school isn't always going to be easy for them. In fact, they learn that they can't rush through their work, give sloppy answers, and still receive a good grade. My students have homework every day and they need to submit it by 3:30 in the afternoon. Then I mark it, return it, and they have to fix their mistakes the same day. Sometimes they will have to try the same problem two or

three times before they get it right. Each time they get it wrong, I'll give more guidance, but the idea is to train students to figure out what's going on for themselves. To be honest, my principal indicator of success is not whether they get the problem right, but when they ask for help. Yes, ask for help!

Now, my approach certainly can't be applied to all, even most elementary school students. But for my students, getting them to ask for help is a very valuable lesson, hopefully one of the most important lessons they will ever learn. Most of my students have never had to ask for help ever in their academic careers. Truth be told, many of them have been told by teachers, parents, even other students how smart and clever they are. For them, everything has been easy. I'm not saying they've cheated, but just like All-Star athletes rarely making good coaches because they can't explain the fundamentals of the game to their players, students for whom school is easy just assume they don't have to try very hard to please the teacher. The problem arises down the road when school or life does get hard — as it inevitably will. If everything has been easy, if you haven't had to spend time thinking, working, struggling, then will you be able to dig in and work and study to succeed when you need to?

What I have observed is most advanced students have a rather high opinion of themselves, at least academically. Some make fun of those not as gifted as they are. They pride themselves on never having to ask the teacher a question, just giving the right answer. To them, the kids who are constantly asking for help, hanging around the teacher's desk, logging on at 2pm for extra help — those kids are somehow inferior. Yes, I've heard those who struggle and need help be called "stupid" and "dumb" — not to their faces necessarily, but often behind their backs.

And I have to confess to you that at times when I was in school, I was one of those kids. I found school to be easy. I didn't work hard and still got top grades. I never felt challenged in my classes, seldom took notes, rarely studied, never had to push myself. That is until 12th grade Calculus, the first class in which I received a "C" ever. Our Senior Calculus class was taught by a man who had been a college professor and he pushed us hard. Suddenly, I was no longer at the top! Suddenly, I had to study! Suddenly, things weren't easy. Uh-Oh! Was this a foretaste of what college was going to be like? In fact it was. Our teacher made it painfully clear: he was showing us what college academics were going to be like and frankly, for the first time in my academic life, I was worried. Calculus was hard! I needed to really put in the time just to stay even with everyone else! Sure, there were a few who got "A's" and "B's" but not me and not most of us.

So yes, friends, as much as I hated Senior Calculus at the time, I am now grateful. Even in my first year of college, I was grateful I had had that course, because I at least had some exposure to what college studying would really be like. No more coasting, no more avoiding notes, no more not spending time in the library. I had to actually work for a change.

That is what I am trying to show my students. School may be easy for them now, but it's going to get harder and even the best will have to make the admission and do what they never thought they would every to: swallow their pride ask for help!

Friends, I am telling you this story of grade school academics not just because I'm glad to be through with the school year, but because the attitudes and actions that are embraced by many of my students are painfully evident in the lives of many of us regarding our relationship with God.

What am I saying? I'm saying that for many of us, we regard our relationship with God like grade school academics — something we don't really need to work very hard at. Sure we go to church, sometimes even weekly, but maybe monthly or less. Yeah, "me and Jesus" we're best buds. Or, as a certain grandfather put it, "Me and God have our own arrangement."

Needless to say, having our "own arrangement" with God is all well and good, most of the time, especially in a country like America. I mean, most of us have a decent life, don't we? We have a house, a job, health care, a family, some money to spend on going out and vacations. We aren't the Kardashians, but then again, who wants to be one of them, really?

The fact of the matter is that on many levels, we really don't need God. Life is fine. We can attribute our situation in life to our own efforts and hard work. We can ask, genuinely ask, what God had to do with determining where we are right now. God, a pretty afterthought, an interesting illusion. So what?

That's when things do turn south, when our neat, tidy, ordered lives become unsettled and uncertain, that's when many people really don't know what to do. When we lose that job, when we get that diagnosis, when that relationship falls apart, in short, when our ordered, comfortable, predictable world vanishes, what to do? What to do?

What to do, indeed? That's why I say our relationship with God can be just as flimsy as my 4th graders' idea that they are brilliant students when the reality is that they've never really been tested. They've never had to work hard before. They've never had to struggle and figure out answers. They've been taking everything for granted.

And so was Israel, 2500 years ago. You know, I think most of us are familiar with the story of God freeing the Hebrews from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. From Egypt they moved to Israel and established themselves as God's people. The problem, of course, was that once the Hebrews settled in Israel, they assumed that they were set. Their God had taken care of them. Sure, they had some ritual obligations, some sacrifices, etc. but for the most part, they could take God for granted.

And the Jews forgot about God and forgot about taking their relationship seriously and forgot to obey and so, when the crisis came about 600BC when the Jews were threatened by the Babylonians and they were in danger of being conquered, they, like my unchallenged students, had no idea what to do. They had no relationship with God anymore. They just assumed the God they no longer worshipped would continue to protect them. And so when they were challenged, challenged to the core of their existence, that had no idea what to do.

What should they have done? What could they have done? What might have happened? The Jews should have come to their senses, swallowed their pride, cried out to the Lord, and repented. But it

didn't happen. The Jews had lost their faith in God. They forget what God was able to do for them. They relied solely on themselves and so they failed. They failed and were defeated and carried into captivity. Isn't that where we are? By "we" I'm not just talking about our church, but our nation. The fact is that too many people have convinced themselves that they don't need God. Everything is OK and whatever we have is due to our own efforts. God has nothing to do with it.

Yet, my friends, is everything OK? People are dying in mass shootings every day. The planet is falling apart because of climate change. Many supposedly educated Americans have no problem embracing lies as truth and are perfectly fine supporting racist dictators and political parties in the erroneous belief that "they" — whoever "they" is, blacks, asians, LBGQT people, immigrants — "they" are responsible for our problems. I tell you that America in 2021 is no different from Israel in 600 BC. A day of reckoning is approaching and we need to take it seriously.

So if this God does exist, what does God have to say? In our scripture from the prophet Ezekiel, God is depicted as taking a branch from a cedar tree, a small, insignificant branch, and planting it atop a high mountain. And that little branch grew and grew and grew and became a tree that bore fruit and sheltered birds and animals alike and was revered by all.

This sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? A sprig of a tree, totally insignificant, totally useless, finding itself atop a mountain and growing into something wonderful, beautiful and powerful. Can it be? Is it true? Does it in any way make sense?

And that's the problem, my friends, Ezekiel's vision only makes sense if we can swallow our pride as human beings and confess that far from being able to go it alone, we need God in our lives. We have to confess individually and collectively that we need help. We need God. Because if we don't, if we can't, if we fail to give up our foolish, stubborn attitudes, everything around us is going to collapse and life as we know it — on any and every level — will change for the worse for a long time to come.

It is not my intention to invoke the forebodings of the prophets of old, but I fear that the ongoing and dwindling ability to trust in God as opposed to human leaders and institutions will ultimately doom us.

The question is this. Do you believe that God can take the most insignificant, meaningless, useless thing — like the branch of a cedar tree — and convert to something powerful, useful and glorious? In whom will you place your trust? US Presidents? Athletes? Celebrities? Business Moguls? Religious Leaders? Scientists? All of them, every one of them, has failed us not just once, but thousands and thousands of times.

No, friends, the only place we can put our trust is in God. The one, holy, loving, caring, trustworthy, just, and all-powerful God. It is God and only God who can and will save us and if we dare trust, God will.

But if we choose not to trust in God, but in ourselves, prepare for the consequences.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.