

Sabbatical Reflections: Part 1 of 3 - May 8 - June 7

Middle school can be ugly; high school is often more of the same. C.S. Lewis recalled the culture of his school days as “a life almost wholly dominated by the social struggle; to get on, to arrive, or, having reached the top, to remain there, [as] the absorbing preoccupation.” As I walked with my counselor Timothy Hunter this spring, I came to find a similar preoccupation still affecting me into my forties. There’s a sinister desire in me to be crowned the homecoming king of life. It’s as if my soul is empty without prestige, friends, and success. I cry with the Apostle Paul, “What a wretched man that I am! Who will save me from this body of death?”

In the murky waters of my soul, I crave glory. But I often go looking for glory in the wrong places, in the wrong way, and with the wrong motive. Only the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ can satisfy my hunger. No earthly glory, fame, or prestige comes close to God’s eternal riches. And wonder of wonders, God has made a way. Through Christ, his atoning blood, and his glorious resurrection, I am made a son of the living God. Jesus is my brother; I am an heir of heaven. By the Spirit, I can now commune with the heavenly Father.

I spent the first two weeks of my sabbatical looking into my soul. It wasn’t pretty, and yet, I believe it has been rewarding. I’m less spiritual and godly than I thought I was. But God the Father loves me (and you) more than I ever thought possible.

In late May, Carrie and I flew out to Utah to hike Zion National Park for our anniversary. (A big thanks to Laura Olson and Tony and Lisa Weber for watching our kids!) We saw the wonders of God. We hiked Angels Landing by the aid of chains through tight precipices. We hiked for 8 hours in The Narrows, slogging through 3 inch to six foot waters, and marveling at the many hundred foot high cliffs on each side. We grieved over the emptiness of the Las Vegas strip. We returned thankful for 19 years of marriage.

In the subsequent weeks, we visited my best friend, David, from high school in Michigan and drove out to western South Dakota to celebrate Carrie’s dear cousin’s wedding. David has walked with me as a Christian brother for almost 30 years. He was the first man with whom I ever confessed sin. He was the first man to hug me and say, “I love you.” I doubt I’d have the calling, family, or life if it weren’t for this dear friend.

In that first month in every city we traveled, we found godly churches worshipping and faithful preachers proclaiming the gospel. In those early weeks, I found great encouragement in Peter Kreeft’s book entitled, *Before I Go*, which I highly recommend. In addition, I enjoyed Tom Nelson’s book *The Flourishing Pastor* and Amor Towles’ newest, *The Lincoln Highway*. Two insightful non-fiction books I took in were *The Socratic Method* by Ward Farnsworth and *The Philosophy of Jesus* by Peter Kreeft. I also reengaged my learning of Hebrew and Greek, and set aside some time to read portions of John Knox and John Bunyan.

One thing I noticed right off in my first month away was how dangerous regular bible teaching can be. The science and art of Bible teaching can trick the preacher into thinking he’s living out the things mentioned in the sermon. But what happens when the preaching venue goes away? Now, the only person my reading addressed was me. I had to face God alone. Friends, He is to be feared, but not merely for his power and justice. Remember what the Psalmist writes, “If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared” (Psalm 130:3-4).