

Faith for Life: 40s
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So, now I'm going into some uncharted territory. Today's decade is the 40s. Being 41 I hardly know anything about the 40s; I'm a rookie, a freshman. I don't know what I'm talking about. But like I told you before, I didn't come up with the questions for each decade. Instead, I'm relying on people smarter and more experienced than me. The question for the 40s is this: *How am I doing?* Or another way of saying it would be, *Is life working?* Let's examine this question and then what God's word might say.

Like we discussed last week, our 30s can be a challenging time when the demands and responsibilities in life grow exponentially. We set a plan for life; we were filled with aspirations and dreams. Demands and responsibilities grew beyond what we were expecting and so we start feeling overwhelmed. But we also get determined: "I'm going to make this work." So, here's what we do: we figure out a way; there might be tons of frustration and trial & error, but we stumble our way into patterns and routines to make life work. We form these habits, routines, and rhythms to get done all that we must. If we're married we divide and conquer. I do this and this and this and my spouse does those things. Week after week, month after month, year after year.

My faithful wife has been carrying many, many loads and responsibilities for our family for as long as we've had children - 17 years. I have my list of things, too, albeit smaller than hers. One of them is grocery shopping. For the last 15 years I've zig zagged the aisles of our local grocery stores on Tuesday mornings; one of these days I'm going to qualify for that senior citizen discount. That's been one of my routines to make life work.

But here's the thing: sometimes the decisions, routines, rhythms we establish aren't good for our long term health. They're not good for our spiritual life or our marriage or for our financial future or for our relationships with our children. There are all kinds of reasons for that. Maybe we didn't know better. Maybe we were lazy. Maybe we made a compromise only intending it to last a week or two, but now it's last years. Maybe it was because we forgot who we are in Christ (our identity) or what we were supposed to do with our life (our purpose). There are all kinds of reasons for it, but many of us established routines, rhythms, and habits early in our life that weren't sustainable.

This is a common one: marriage enrichment. It's pretty easy to ignore cultivating a healthy marriage to make life work in your 20s and 30s work. I mean, who has time for romance, dating, flirting, and affirming words when the kids need to get to school? When the laundry needs to get done? When we become volunteers at church or coaching the t-ball team? I bet there's some of you out there thinking, "Ooo! I do! Me, me!" I bet one of the reasons you say that is because you are starved for that because you've put it off. In an effort to make life work these are some of the things you've sacrificed. And now you're realizing, "That was a mistake."

Now you're trying to hold on. Now you're trying to figure out what went wrong. Some throw in the towel. Others give up and resign to a loveless marriage.

Or take our spiritual lives. Question: What do you get when you don't schedule into your life seeking God? No time for Bible reading or Bible studies, no mental energy to pursue the things of God? You pick shopping, camping, Packer games on Sundays rather than worshipping God? Answer: You get a dry and shriveled up faith. You get no joy when you think about who God is and what he's done for you. You get no help, no resolve, no hope when tragedy strikes. Rather than trusting and believing in God during your hard times, you blame God.

How am I doing? Is life working? I'm 41 years old and I can say some things are working pretty well. I'm a pretty happy guy. But, honestly, just in the last few years God has rudely, but loving has revealed to me how things aren't working as well as they should. Maybe you can say that, too, regardless of how old you are. So, let's bring these questions and concerns to God this morning.

The passage I want to take you to might be a tad strange or it may not seem to provide the kind of encouragement we need when we ask, "How am I doing?" and the answer is, "Not so good." But, at the foundation of what God is saying there is hope. So let's turn to Prov. 19:3 (READ).

Notice that vs. 3 doesn't start out by saying, "*If* a man's folly brings his way to ruin," it says *when*. This isn't even a question. This is what happens when we live foolishly. When we foolishly prioritize entertainment and amusement over pursuing God our way will come to ruin. When we foolishly ignore cultivating a healthy and loving marital relationship our marriage will come to ruin. When we foolishly choose to spend more than we make our financial future will come to ruin. This is what happens. In fact, some translations don't even include the word *when*. They just say something like *a man's folly brings his way to ruin*.

There's no question that by the time we hit our 40s we've endured some injustices at the hands of other people. This is a mean, cruel world. It wouldn't be difficult to thumb through the rolodex of our memory to find other people to blame for some of the challenges in our life. But if we're honest, we're the ones who make a mess of things. We're so tempted to think that our life is what happens to us, when in reality life is what we make of it. This temptation is even more intense these days where many consider it virtuous to be a victim. Even in the trials, even in the gross misfortunes from the hands of others, we're the ones who take the destructive paths towards coping and healing rather than turning to God with our fear, our hurts, and our disappointments.

The first step towards finding some healing and life is admitting we've taken the foolish steps that lead to ruin. We did that. My marriage is hurting because I've neglected it. I'm in debt because I managed my money poorly. I feel far away from God, not because he abandoned me, but because I abandoned him. Do you see how specific those statements are? I'm guessing

every single one of you could say, “I’ve taken some foolish steps.” Yep, we all have. But which ones? You have to get specific. Do you know why? Because the first step towards repentance, towards changing, is admitting exactly where you’ve made the mistakes. How can you change course, how can you fix mistakes, if you don’t know or won’t admit what they are?

Blaming others, including God, is a sign that we’re not ready to walk away from the foolish path. It’s a sign that we aren’t ready to change and repent. Look at vs. 3 again, “When a man’s folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the Lord.” A fool has an angry heart against God when things turn out poorly *because they think it’s his fault*. A foolish person is always looking for someone to blame. A wise person looks at himself or herself in the mirror and says, “I did this. I’m here right now because of what I did, what I said, what I neglected.”

I mentioned earlier that this verse might not sound like the most hopeful or the most encouraging. I get that, but let me see if I can turn it on it’s head to encourage you with it. Let me summarize it this way: *Things not going well for you is one of God’s ways of calling you home* (REPEAT).

I remember being in the grocery store with my mom when I was a boy and it was free samples day. And that day the Lord was shining his face upon me because they had free samples of pizza. So, so my plan was to park myself by that sample cart to get as much pizza as I could before I got the evil-eye from the employee managing that station. The employee was using one of those countertop stoves or cookers to cook the pizza. To an 8 year old boy, the surface to that countertop stove looked identical to a stainless steel counter. I never would have thought it was searing hot. So when I went to reach for a piece of pizza, rested my my hand on the stove. It took a split second for all of my neurons to fire appropriately so my brain could let me know, “hey, buddy, remove your hand.” My reflexes kicked in and pulled my hand away, but not before I got a burn; I had a nice little blister there for the next couple of days.

That’s kind of like what consequences are like for our soul. When our life comes to ruin it’s one of God’s ways to signal to us, “Hey, something’s wrong! You need to take your hand off the burner! You need to change directions.” I know it doesn’t feel this way, but these unpleasant consequences in life are God’s mercies. He’s letting us know we need to turn. He’s signaling to us that the path we’re walking is the path towards death. It’s really good to hear that message. It might just save our life. If we’re stubborn and hard-hearted it may not, but that’s the intent. Will you pay attention to the message? Will you repent? Do you have ears to hear and eyes to see?

One the one hand, repentance is incredibly hard. We have to admit that we’ve been walking in the wrong direction for a really long time. That’s humbling. Also, remember, we chose the path because it was working for us... in a certain way. We’ve learned that it wasn’t working in other, crucial ways. But still, it’s hard to imagine giving up on a path that we’ve been walking so long. And we may not know what to do. I know I’ve felt that way. When the consequences to some of my life-decisions were like a hot pan burning my hand, I said, “This isn’t working! I need to make some changes.” But I didn’t know what to do. But do you know what I did know to do,

because of the grace of God? Repent. I knew enough to say, “God, I’m messing up. Please come and help. I need to change directions, but I don’t know where to go.”

And do you know what God brings when we repent? Life. So as hard and humbling as repentance is, friends, it’s the first step towards life. God has more for you. Don’t be the fool who’s heart rages against the Lord; instead, see him for who he is. Your loving Creator who has more for you.

I’m wondering if some of you feel like it’s too late. You’re rather hopeless. I get why you might feel that way. But don’t give into your feelings. I’m reminded of the small prophetic book of Joel in the OT. We learn in this book that the people of Israel are exactly where some of us might be. For centuries they chose a path that was leading them away from God. And now they are reaping the whirlwind. God said, “If you reject me, all these bad things are going to happen to you. Don’t go that way,” but they did. We learn in chapter 1 that the land is going through a terrible drought, exactly what God said would happen. And it’s a miserable time and people are hopeless. But with God there’s always hope. There’s always tomorrow. But that hope comes on the other end of repentance and change. In 1:13 that’s what God invites; he says, “Put on sackcloth and lament, O priest; wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God! Because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.”

But why? Is there any hope? Well listen to the next chapter after the Lord does return with blessing (READ Joel 2:23-25). I love vs. 25. God can and does restore to us the lost years. You might look at the last 10 years, 20 years, and the mess you’ve made and think, “It’s all gone; it’s all hopeless. I’ve lost everything.” And yes, you may have loss some very precious things. But listen to the power of God. He can restore to you the years you did lose. I don’t know exactly what that means for your finances, marriage, relationship with your kids, whatever. But here’s what I do know: it’s not too late. It’s never too late to start going in the right direction. It’s never too late for God to bring the life you need. And I believe with all my heart that when we honor God he will blow our socks off with the kind of blessing he has for us when we turn to him with our whole heart. Will you? Will you turn?

Can I suggest something? You’ve already heard me say this in previous messages in this series. If in your 40s (or however old you might be) and things are a mess, I would bet you’ve forgotten who you are (your identity) and what you should be doing with your life (your purpose). Those were the big questions of our teens and 20s. And if we get those wrong then it’s not a surprise we find ourselves struggling in our 40s or 50s (pay attention to that you 20 and 30 year olds; make sure that you don’t forget who you are and your purpose so that you avoid the pain later in life.).

Here’s how this works: When you remember who you are you remain close and connected to God. When you remember who you are (that I’m a sinner, meaning, I’m quite

prone to going the wrong way if I'm not careful; and that I'm a child of God, meaning, I need to stay close to him) you make sure to include the kinds of practices and disciplines that keep you in the Lord. And remembering your purpose is like keeping a close eye on your compass when you charting your course. It keeps you focused on the things you must do and helps you ignore the clutter and the distractions. When you start creating those routines and rhythms with your purpose in mind you can ask, "Will this help me accomplish God's purpose for my life?"

It's never too late, my good friends. Yes, a lot of life has passed, but there's a lot left to live. Turn away from those routines and patterns that have contributed to the trouble. Turn to Jesus and watch him restore to you the years that have been lost and thank him for them.

Key vs. Prov. 19:3

Questions for the week

- Is regret good or bad? Or when is regret a good thing and when is it unhelpful?
- What are some changes you know you need to make? What is the first step you should take?
- What message or truth was most helpful to you today? How come?