

“The State of the Church”

by **Pastor Tim Dodson**
at **JF Believers Church**
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Psalms 90:12 *Teach us to realize the brevity of life, so that we may grow in wisdom.* (NLT)

It seems I have been at this “pastor-thing” for a very long time now. I guess it is a sure sign of age when things start to occur in circular patterns

and events repeat themselves. One of the *deja vu* church models I have witnessed is this: People at some point in their lives come on board either via salvation or a commitment event...a turning point *if you will*, in their lives. They then over time get involved in church, eventually in service and community. They grow in spiritual and biblical knowledge and experience. They are moving steadily ahead. But then something seemingly inexplicable happens. Many of these folks slowly but surely spiritually “retire.” They find a faith “park bench” where they plant themselves, and then spend the next years of their lives feeding the pigeon’s.

However, scripture seems to be replete with historical instances and passages which clearly give us the understanding that God has a “destiny” for each of us. A “reason we were born.” A “purpose for our lives.” Psalms 138:8 - *The LORD will work out his plans for my life... your faithful love, O LORD, endures forever. Don't abandon me, for you made me.* Yet so many of us appear to reach some random level of comfort and satisfaction in our Christian lives and we simply stop. Maybe we are just tired of the race and weary of the fight. Paul the apostle however was a guy who just inexplicably kept going...kept fighting...staying on the field his whole life. Maybe you know some people like that, *I certainly do*. People who are like “energizer bunnies” who just keep running. When Paul was finally “heading home,” he said this in 2 Timothy 4:4-6; “...*the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith...*”

I “fought a good fight”....I “finished my course.”

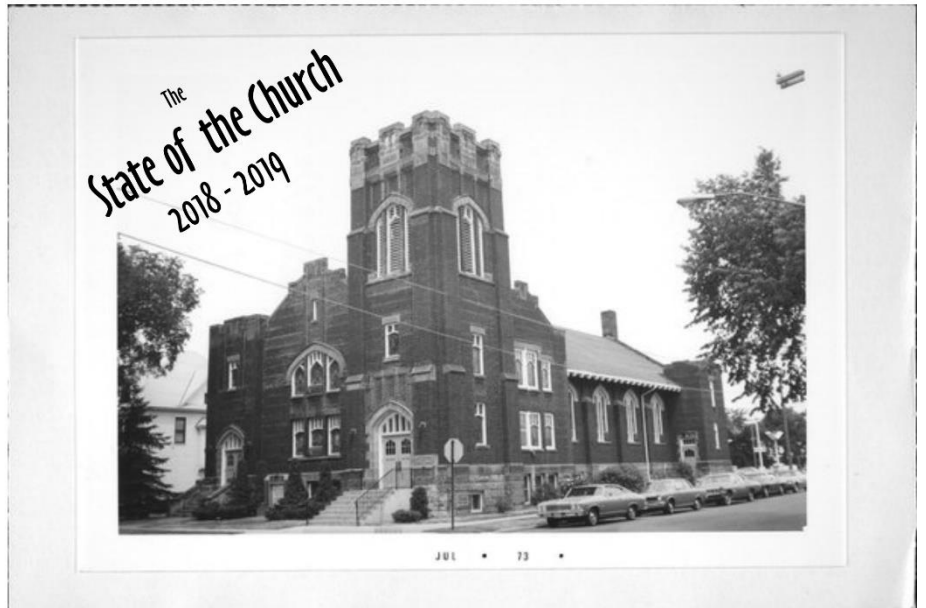
My concern for this fellowship as we march forward toward the “end of days,” is that so many of us haven’t “finished our course,” and we long ago stopped fighting. I fear that many of us have simply joined the ranks of the worldly, pursuing the same things as they do, seeking the same comforts as they do, desiring the same life elements as they do. We know that the scriptures warn us about such melding into the world;

Romans 12:2 “*Do not be conformed to this world...*”

Proverbs 1:15 “*My son, do not walk in the way with them...*”

1 Peter 2:9 NLT “... *you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God’s very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light...*”

1 John 2:15-17 “*Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him...*”



These are but a few of the scriptural warnings, *and yet* so many of us simply ignore such and get in line to attempt the impossible...to take a shot at what has never been done, and that is to embrace the world **and** live for Christ also.

Many of you know that my wife Sharon over the past couple of years has had two cornea transplants. She has remarked how despite knowing the hereditary probability of the condition which precipitated these procedures, her sight degraded so slowly and subtly over time that she didn't really realize it was happening or at least happening to the degree that it was. There were times she even blamed other issues...bad glasses or high humidity conditions. But it wasn't those things. She was in fact slowly but inevitably going blind, and the extent and depth of the problem wasn't clearly understood until her cornea transplant and then it was like a dream...a crisp blue morning sunrise and the wonder and joy of clear sight! This is the spiritual condition of many of us today...slowly "going blind" but over time just getting used to it and thus not really realizing how far we have drifted.

It was Paul the apostle who called upon us in 2 Corinthians 13:5 to "*Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves. Surely you know that Jesus Christ is among you; if not, you have failed the test of genuine faith.*" If we were to look at our personal lives, homes, and families today, would we see a distinct difference between us and the world at large? Do we *look* any different? Are we *pursuing different things*? Are we *living daily* any different than the rest of the world? Are OUR priorities...our time use, any different than theirs? Often, the answer is quite honestly "no." And we inadvertently teach our children then to do the same thing. Their lives are often immersed with those who are not from Christian homes, and they are encouraged to chase the same worldly activities and to exert their energies for the same empty goals of those of this world. So how are we "*coming up from amongst them and being separate?*" (2 Corinthians 6:17)

So firstly today, as your pastor, *I believe*, and as your church ***we believe***, that out there is a created destiny for each one of us that are children of God. And it ends when we are dead, and never before. But most of us even now do not know what that destiny is, and even more foreboding is that we don't know how to find it or how to get there, because we appear to be "stuck" where we are. We used to live dangerously when we were young. We did crazy things in the name of Christ and kingdom. But now? Well, now we're kinda tired and we don't want to do those things any more.

For example: How many of us have car payments, gym membership dues, or a monthly Netflix membership but we struggle with even the *idea* of tithing? (...and how many who will remember nothing about this message except that statement and will bristle because of such?) We have multiple hobbies that have nothing to do with putting food on the table, but we cringe at the concept of regularly serving the body of Christ in which we belong. If we do it, are we thankful for the opportunity or do we complain at its perceived mandate? **Missions trips?** Out of the question...*can't afford it and I would have to lose weight.* **Higher spiritual education?** *No way...I don't have the time and I don't understand that stuff.* **Greater service and larger commitment?** *Out of the question...that's for pastors and I have a real job so...* **Full time ministry?** *Absolutely not...how would I get a spouse and a family?* And the list goes on and on.

Why do I bring this issue up this morning? Because my fear is, that for many of us, this is our "State of the Church." We started out with a bang, but we faded with a whimper. Many of us are distracted, without passion, and worldly. We are stressed about the same things as the world, because we are ***chasing*** the same things as the world. We started out bold, but now find ourselves passively in the shadows.

Now with that being said, I know I am "preaching to the choir" with some of you. Because some of you have literally arranged the whole of your life to make yourself available to God's calling and kingdom service. For you, fulfilling your "destiny" in Christ is the strongest pull in your life and decisions. But church-wide, that is far from the case and truly is an issue today. And so, for 2019, it will be an "issue addressed" here in this fellowship. We as a church want you to know and fulfill your calling to its fullest. Ultimately it will be up to you personally to step out of the world upon hearing the call...*the Lord, saying: "Whom shall I send, And who will go for Us?"*

...and like Isaiah we will answer "*Here am I! Send me.*" (Isaiah 6:8) We will continue to provide to you the tools for which to make such a commitment in your lives, because that is one of our jobs as a church before God!

You see, despite conventional wisdom and modern thinking, we must always resist the temptation to coddle the flock and pacify spiritual lethargy. If we do, then there is no unique purpose for us to exist as a church. Unless we are *different* then we are not *needed*. And if we are not *needed* then why be here? There are already enough other churches around where you can attend a Sunday "feel-good" service that will never offend you, or challenge you, or hold your feet to the fire. The fact is, many of us literally chose a church and attend a church in order to be regularly "encouraged" in the life that we are living and that *we* have chosen. In the furthest stretch of the imagination I ask you, "How is that Christianity?" May we never be one of them! As The old saying righteously goes: "May we comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." The bible tells us to "pick up our cross...*which means to die to this world and this life*, and 'follow Him.'"

We have focused some on the issue of the Holy Spirit over the previous year. We must continue in such teaching, because nothing is harder to watch than a saved soul that is operating outside of the Holy Spirit's control. It is a slow motion train wreck. We must learn more about Spiritual Warfare and how, *as Paul put it*, to "fight the fight." We are now in the "long haul" phase of our spiritual lives. What will we do with it? Spiritual Warfare will be the topic of the Covenant Conference this year, for those of you that are members and are a real part of this church. For those of you that are not yet in that place, we will continue to provide avenues of education, information, and counsel to move you to that place of maturity where you can leave the "customer" and "consumer" ideals that are so propagated in other churches, and move you into a place of "co-worker." This "path" is clearly embraced and presented here at JFB and open to all to participate in. But let us be clear...*there are no shortcuts or special treatment*. The road to salvation and to Covenant membership is universal to all.

However, for those who reject this path, I am afraid you will find yourself continually more and more marginalized within church activities. This is not meant to be punitive, but those here who are so committed need room and opportunity to fellowship with like minds and teaching that is geared toward them and the fulfilling of their destiny which they want to experience! We must consider *their* spiritual growth and maturity also as a church, not just those on the outside of commitment and sacrifice. We will always be 'calling out' to people on the outside, but we must also nurture and develop those on the inside. Those of you in the latter camp have 'taken it on the chin' over the past few years as we spent a great deal of time holding the hands of those who were not growing up because they didn't *want* to grow up. To you, I apologize and I'm telling you that we are and will be moving to do differently. *But* let it be understood that the doors of this church will always be open for church service attendance to you and anyone who comes here in peace to be a part of such. So if you chose to not be a covenant member, you will always be welcome in our Sunday services but you will always be considered a guest and a visitor!

As a faithful fellowship of believers, we must regularly and consistently define who we are. What is our purpose and why do we exist and what unique aspects drive us forward as a church? Certainly we are firstly and foremost a committed Bible church, where the Word of God is central and vital to who we are, what we do, and the decisions and directions we pursue. The Scripture will always be where the buck stops on all matters of faith and operation around here. If it ever ceases to be, then it's time to "pack it in."

Secondly today, we seek to be a loving church, even in a day and age where the whole principle of love is so corrupted and its eternal and essential meaning lost, that in our practice of such we are sometimes accused of the opposite of love. But for us, love is truthful and in fact it "rejoices in the truth" as 1 Corinthians 13:6 tells us. So our love will sometimes be rejected because the truth behind it is being rejected! But we must forever clearly delineate between God's version of love and the ever fluid version the world is peddling. If we lose track of this, then it is over for us. For it is John 13:35 that tells us that it is by such love...*real* love...*authentic God love* ...that they *out there* will know we are Christians. However, we must also continually *teach* that love definition, because *as I have said*, that authentic picture has been lost in the pages of time, and has been replaced by

something sticky sweet, overtly physical, eminently emotional, and overtly passive and accepting. But Jesus never taught that version, and in fact He clearly practiced otherwise. Let us do the same.

In these two broad directives I have covered, lies the simple Jesus-Style ministry we are called to: Love God and love others. Matthew 22:36-39 says *“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” Jesus said to him, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”*

There are so very many things happening in this church community. A customer in the coffeehouse quipped the other day “what is it that consumes the pastors here all day? What keeps them so busy up there?” Oh, if they only knew! While I used to detail all those issues, pursuits, and projects here in this message each year, we now present them before only those who are joined to us in Covenant Body.

Our goal here is always to grow in number...to have the opportunity to minister to more people, but moreover and firstly to grow stronger in our maturity, our vision, our calling, *our destiny*. In Acts 9:31 Jesus had just delivered a painful bout of love upon Paul... the new apostle on the block. The scriptures then record this: *“The church then had peace throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, and it became stronger as the believers lived in the fear of the Lord. And with the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, it also grew in numbers.”*

So let us not make this all today more complicated than it is! Let us go on into 2019 in the “fear of the Lord” and under the indwelling control of the Holy Spirit. It’s not magic, nor is it part of a modern church growth scheme. It is simply a forever forward moving Holy Spirit driven obedient servant of Christ who is for the long haul.

Welcome to 2019. What do you want it to look like? How serious are **you** about this whole Jesus thing?