

'Follow Me'

The Mercy, Grace, and Power in God's Calling

Hunter D. Swanson

Given 13-Oct-25; Sermon #FT25-07s

What I am about to say may shock some of you but I ask that you hear me out. My mom dying was one of the best things that ever happened to me.

Yes, I heard her scream out in pain trying to get into bed before she was formally diagnosed.

Yes, I watched her hair slowly lose its color.

Yes, I saw her go from walking around normally to needing a walker to go five feet.

Yes, after my dad called me down that night, saying it was time, I sat beside her final bed with my sister, my dad, and my grandma as we waited.

And yes, I watched my father lose his wife as I listened to her take her last breath.

A lot of things happened over the months leading to that night on December 3rd of 2018. A lot of awful things that really showed the brutality of intense sickness, particularly cancer in this case. Things that really cause your mind to put up a wall to try and shut off your emotions and everyone around you. Things that harden you and can make you very abrasive to other people, even the ones you care the most about.

But despite all of these things, despite how truly terrible the entire process and experience was, I stand before you today confident that what I said is true. That my mom dying was one of the best things that ever happened to me.

Now some of you might be thinking, wow, this guy is crazy, which, no, you would not be wrong, but here, I am perfectly sane in saying this. You see,

despite all the heartache, despite all the tears, despite all the things that I still struggle to unsee or unhear, there is something deep beneath the surface of these events that is most precious to me. Beneath every tear was God's comfort that I can only explain as a warm feeling of not being alone. Beneath every inch that my mom moved her cane as she walked was God's strength keeping her moving at all.

Beneath each person that came to our house to show my mom and my family love was God giving us this support to keep pushing through another day. Beneath my mom being given weeks to live, yet continuing to live well over a year after that, was God's grace and mercy showing that He was present. And beneath the death of my mom, was God saying, "You'll be okay. Now, follow Me."

If you would turn to Matthew chapter 8, please. I just want two verses here to start, verses 21 and 22.

Matthew 8:21-22 Then another of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." Then Jesus said to him, "Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

I really anchored on this set of scriptures for a long time, and at first I took it pretty literally. While losing a mom would shake anyone, I was extremely close to mine, as many are, and she played a critical role, really, in bringing me back to church. She was the first one to push me to keep going when I was being a pretty godless person, and she was the first one to comfort me when I was struggling deeply. And while I did it pretty poorly, I followed my mom's lead for the most part when it came to the church and subconsciously, I knew it was going to be pretty difficult to lose that aspect of her leadership.

So reading the words "let the dead bury their own dead" really hit home at the time, almost like I was being given permission to let it happen, even though I had no control in the matter, obviously. And thankfully, God decided I was worth keeping around, and I was able to take comfort in moving on from not just following my mom, but to truly following Christ.

I want to reread what we are just at, but I want to go back and start in verse 19.

Matthew 8:19-22 Then a certain scribe came and said to Him, "Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." Then another of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

Take note of how Christ responded to the scribe who said he would follow Him. He said, foxes have the holes that they dig where they make their home, and the birds have their nests that they create as their home, but that Christ Himself does not have an earthly home. He does not have a place to lay His head, for as we know, His true home is with the Father. Knowing where Christ's home really is lets us read between the lines and see that it is a matter of placing value.

While taking these verses literally was comforting to me for a time, the dead obviously cannot bury other dead, and so we can very quickly see, especially within the given context, that Christ is speaking of those who are spiritually dead and the need for us to put off the old man, as it were, and pursue what is necessary to put on the new. This presents the question of how are we even supposed to try and follow Christ if we cannot currently go where He is. Well, in John 14, Christ says He goes to prepare a place for us. And if we think about how sinful and inexperienced man is, then logically we ourselves must also be prepared for that place, and we usually need a pretty swift kick in the head to get going.

Imagine you are getting a new job, but everything about it is foreign to you. It has a different dress code with clothes you do not own. It requires specialized equipment that you do not own. It requires knowledge you do not have, and of course, skills that you do not possess. Sounds pretty underqualified to me.

But the job knows these things and still wants you. And so you are provided with uniforms, equipment, and instruction and operation manuals, all the

while also providing mentors and leadership to help you learn as you go until ultimately you are skilled enough to handle your work on your own and eventually train others for the same abilities and knowledge that you have gained. This is very much how I view God preparing us. He gives us the Bible, His Spirit, and the equipment and situations necessary for our growth and training. Our training just so happens to usually be extremely uncomfortable and painful through trials, but it is necessary because we cannot, of course, put off the things of this world without God's intervention.

This, of course, is not applied just to an initial impactful calling. We get shuffled around various departments, if you will, and have to learn new skills all the time. And often there is a lot for us to relearn as well. God has to call us to follow Him every single day, and too many times do we blind ourselves to the work of God in our trials and suffering because the pain is so great.

But if we honestly look through what God is allowing us to endure with His help, we can clearly see His purpose and His will and even learn to be joyful in trials—yes, even the death of a loved one—as we are admonished in James 1:2.

Let us join Cajun Paul as he practices his mild Midwestern accent in II Corinthians 12, where he gives us a pretty healthy perspective on handling trials for Christ's sake. We will be reading verses 7 through 10.

II Corinthians 12:7-10 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Unlike those who wish to take advantage of our weaknesses for twisted sinful gain, Christ wants us to just realize where our true strength is, which is in Him. And for what it is worth, we do not need to be thankful for trials just

because it is right to be thankful for God's work, but it does make them easier too. By giving up the reins, we can let Christ do His perfect work, putting His strength within us. And after all this, after seeing through our trials, through our sufferings, after we are trained in our new job to become more skilled, lies what I think is one of the most important parts of our response to God's calling.

We not only have the opportunity to, but we are *obligated* to use our experiences not to selfishly lift ourselves up, but to glorify Christ and lift others up. Through my mom getting sick and eventually dying, the feeling of support, confidence, and strength directly from God was not the only gift God gave me. He gave me support through other people sharing their stories of troubling times and their advice, people who had suffered arguably much more than anything I could fathom even at that time within my perspective. And He gave me one of the best blessings of all during this time, my wife.

You see, we need others. We need each other and others need us. We have a way of feeling like our current trials are always as hard as they will ever get, and it is so easy, like I mentioned, to put up our walls to block off everyone around. But it is in those moments that we need to support the most. And I have to ask, do you consider that there are others around you in that same position? People suffering that may need your support the most.

Turn with me to Luke chapter 22. I could have easily kept this entire message just focused on God telling us to follow Him, to witness His works in our lives, but we cannot afford to forget how important it is to consider our duty to strengthen our fellow brethren in response to Him.

Luke 22:31-32 And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren."

Brethren, just as Simon Peter returning to Christ, when we were given the gift of life through Christ, returning from sin, should we not likewise also heed the same instruction and strengthen our brethren accordingly? What are we doing here at the Feast? Are we just trying to have a relaxing vacation where we eat and drink whatever we want, wherever we want, whenever we

want, before going home to basically do the same thing with just a worse view? I hope not.

And while of course God could imprint on our minds every bit of knowledge if He chose to, that is not the way He typically works. God of course did give me some. He led me to open specific scriptures so I could immediately see His work and meaning in my life. But those that God put in my life cannot be ignored or forgotten, as they really added a lot of perceived weight to God's work, and their service can never be understated, which is what it really is.

We have already heard so much about sacrifice already, and we are truly obligated to sacrifice and serve our spiritual family. I will be fair; service to God can be pretty hard to figure out sometimes. I believe I have said it before, but I think a lot of us tend to attach it to performing at church services, whether it be song leading, praying, or speaking, which is how I viewed it for the longest time as well.

It was not until one of my worst trials with my mom that I finally realized there is so much more to serving God, to serving His body, and of course, none of it is in vain. Just as I Corinthians 15:58 tells us "to abound in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord," we must abound in the work of the Lord to love and support our brethren, to share our experiences, to lift them up, to show them how valuable they are to us, to God, and each other. If you have ever been around someone who is always smiling and in positive spirits, you know how infectious it is. So likewise, in the support of our brethren, be infectious.

Have you ever been in deep conversation with someone about how God worked in their life and just thought, eh. Probably not, at least not often if you are in the right mindset. And every single time someone tells me their stories of God's work in their lives, I am only ever in awe. I often do not even know how to respond properly. The more witnesses we hear of God's work, the stronger our faith becomes.

As we know from Romans 10:17, faith is increased by hearing. And likewise, our witness builds up the faith of others. We should remember how selfish it is to keep it to ourselves, which is of course exactly what Satan

wants. He wants us to think that we are so special because our lives are harder than everyone else's, that no one else gets it.

He wants us to silo ourselves into a little club where we think we are completely alone and in a weird way better than others because we have suffered more. But really, brethren, God says He will be exalted among all the earth. He cannot be exalted among all the earth if only one was His witness. Think about that.

If we neglect our opportunity to share the Word of God to others, we are holding back from the potential to increase someone else's faith in God, and instead of aiding and growing the Family of God, we add to Satan's efforts in reducing it. If we allow ourselves to only look at how difficult our lives are and ignore how God has worked in others, we ultimately tell God no when He says to follow Him. And I hope I do not have to remind you how poor that choice is.

If you would join me in Isaiah 43, I would like to wrap up with a very comforting and moving scripture for me, because as we are continually called every day to follow Him, we must remember that it is Christ and Christ alone who saves us, that His grace, mercy, and power does not belong to just us.

We are going to read verses 1 through half of 3, and then we are going to drop down to verses 10 and 11.

Isaiah 43:1-3 But now, thus says the Lord, who created you, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."

Isaiah 43:10-11 "You are My witnesses," says the Lord, "and My servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe Me,

'Follow Me' by Hunter D. Swanson (<https://www.cgg.org>)

and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, nor shall there be after Me. I, even I, am the Lord, and besides Me there is no savior."

To have God choose to work with us, to redeem and call us is the greatest blessing we will ever receive, even if we struggle to fathom or understand His methods. Even now, as I still endure other intense trials that really shake me to my core, I am able to remember that God is there even if I do not feel like He is.

I meant it when I said my mom dying is one of the best things that ever happened to me. It showed me that even though life can feel impossible, God makes it possible. He gave me a personal witness to God's love and His work with us that I have been able to hold onto ever since.

Heeding God's calling is not an easy task, brethren, but it is for that exact reason that we cannot let our witness to God's mercy, grace, and power in our lives go to waste. So be the best sheep a shepherd could ask for, and heed God when He calls and says, "Follow Me."