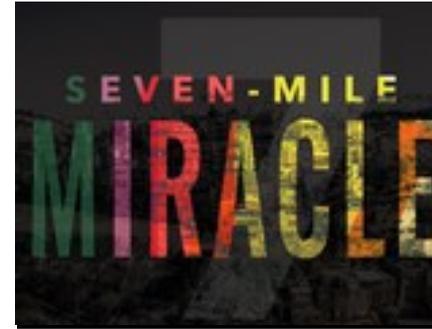


When I woke up from the anesthesia, the first person that I saw was my wife. We waited until the doctor came with the results. And these were his words: “Cesar, we did the procedure but we couldn’t find anything; all your digestive system and colon were clean. We have never seen a cleaner and healthier colon as yours.” When they released me from the hospital with the results in my hand, I went home – happy. And since that day, I have never felt that pain again.

In conclusion, after 26 years of being a Christ follower, God has allowed me to experience a time in my life in which my faith was weak and doubt has clouded my vision. It had literally felt like one brick after another, building a wall that kept me far away from God.

But it was at the end of the day, on the road to Emmaus, that Cleopas and his companion recognized Jesus. It took them *all* day. After a day of sadness and hopelessness, it was not until the end of the day when Jesus handed them a piece of bread that their eyes were opened to Who was in front of them.

The same thing happened to me; it was at the end of those experiences that I recognized that God really was in control of my life and the lives of my family. The invitation for you this morning is not to stay in Emmaus, but return to Jerusalem because you never know what Jesus has for you.



MARCH 24, 2019

**Matthew 27:46
A Word of Abandonment**

PASTOR CESAR HERNANDEZ

About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”). Matthew 27:46

A Word of Abandonment—Fighting my Faith

During the last three weeks we have been discussing the last words of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. Three weeks ago, according to the Church calendar, we entered the season of Lent. Ash Wednesday was the day that marked the beginning of this Lent season. The Easter season is a journey of preparation for forty days when Christians are called to deepen their spiritual lives through the practices of fasting, prayer and reading the Bible, etc.

Lent is a time in which some of us challenge ourselves to become consistent in improving areas of our lives such as: physical health (exercise more, eat healthier). Some plan to “give something up” like snacking in-between meals, texting and driving, rolling your eyes at your parents, complaining, drinking more than 1 cup of coffee per day. Others prefer to go beyond the usual practice of “giving something up” and strive to improve their spiritual lives and well-being by stripping away all that is unnecessary and becoming more mindful of how God is working in their lives. You know, there are a variety of things that we can do during this season of Lent.

Our theme for this year is called the Seven Mile Miracle and this title came from a journey that two travelers took from Jerusalem to Emmaus in the Gospel of Luke 24:13. The story is very interesting and you can read it when you go back home later today, but here is a summary of the story. The narrative of the story tells us about two people (Cleopas and his companion) who are walking to Emmaus, and suddenly Jesus begins to walk with them but they don’t recognize who He is. They look sad and disappointed and Jesus (the third person in the scene), in verse 19, asks them why they are sad and they answer, “*About Jesus of Nazareth, “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed*

before God and all the people. ²⁰ The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; ²¹ but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel." In other words, they had hope that Jesus would redeem Israel, they had not expected Him to die; their hope was crucified. So now they are running away from Jerusalem, their hearts are broken, they are going back home; they are walking away from the promise. It was over, they had no faith, no future because they had built their hope in Jesus and their hope was literally crucified on a cross ... Continuing on with the story, it became night when the two travelers decided to stop and eat dinner. It was here that they recognized Jesus when He broke the bread and gave it to them. And Scripture goes on to tell us that immediately, they returned at once to Jerusalem to share that Jesus was alive.

A word of abandonment from Jesus was a word very similar to what Cleopas and his companion expressed on their way to Emmaus. They were going back home; they planned to RETURN because their hope had been crushed. The same thing happened with Jesus; He felt abandoned by His Father at that moment on the cross. Jesus' words were "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*" (Which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"). It is difficult to understand this situation. I understand when He said "*Father forgive them*" or when He said "*Today you will be with me in paradise*" and of course I understand that He was caring for His mother but at that time, after six hours of being hung on that cross and with all that pain that he was feeling, His words to me were a complete shock. "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" Jesus felt rejected, He felt separated, lost, hopeless, that what He was enduring was too overwhelming.

I understand and it makes sense to me when Peter denied Jesus. Do you all remember that? When Peter denied that He knew Jesus not once, but three times? Peter was an impulsive and weak man and I get that. I also understand that all the disciples ran away when Jesus was on the cross, they turned their back on Him. I get that, it makes sense to me.... but for Jesus to be forsaken by His own Father in the moment of his greatest need? That makes no sense to me at all.

And this leads me to think about how many times I have felt abandoned. I am not sure about you, but I have felt that way too. I have been there (in that stage) so many times in my life. The two travelers lost their hope. Maybe you have been there, or maybe you are there now.

- Maybe when you unexpectedly got laid-off
- Or it could be that you were hoping that your kids would love Jesus when they

When you look back on your life and see God's faithfulness, your faith becomes stronger and then you begin to see God's faithfulness even in your life now. And let me tell you something, my friends... it's in that moment that we truly recognize the power of God emerging in our lives. You know, we all can have bad days or bad weeks, or months, or years; but when we start to think about all those moments in which we see the glory of God, when we begin to shift our mindset from despair to God's faithfulness, our attitude towards our circumstances changes.

Lastly, I want to share with you something that I personally endured. In 2014, when I was serving in Ringwood as lead pastor, I began to feel a pain in my stomach. It was the type of physical pain that was the most extreme. I couldn't explain the pain. My body could not sustain any solid food, not even liquids. I lost 30 pounds. I went down to 126 lbs. from 155 lbs. After numerous doctors' visits and second opinions from others, no one could figure out what I had.

Throughout four months of living in pain day by day, I showed up at church to do my regular duties. I did my pastoral visitations at homes and hospitals, baptisms, and I also did a couple weddings during those hard months. Throughout all of it, I wasn't feeling well. I was sick, under inexplicable pain. I felt alone, I felt that God wasn't with me and again I raised the question WHY. I could not be with my family very often because of the pain and I would literally hold my stomach and put pressure on it because I was desperate to be relieved from the pain.

On one of my last visits to the doctor, I was told that they were going to prepare me for a scan of my colon because they thought I had colon cancer. That was very scary for me. I was very afraid, frustrated, and I had so many questions for God. So they set up a time and a day to do the procedure to identify if it was cancer or not. The night before, I went to sleep as normal but I woke up at 2am because of the pain. I went to my office, I turned the radio on and I started to praise and worship God. And during that time I found myself fighting with my feelings and I told God, "Please go ahead and do whatever you want to do with me. Anything you will do with me, I will take it." Then I felt that something came out of my body. Hours later, I was at the hospital and the doctor and nurses put me under local anesthesia. Honestly, I was very afraid of what the results would be. What if it was cancer? What stage of cancer? How long would I live? Even though these questions were swarming in my mind, at the same time I had confidence that God was with me and would never leave me alone.

And this was the third thing that I learned: **focus on God's face.**

the question, WHY? was on my mind. Why was this happening to my wife and I again?

You know, that stage of my life was not easy to swallow. But I had a choice to make. To resent and worry or to focus on God's promises for me and my family and choose to have faith. **Because God's Word is a weapon to overcome our feelings and fight for faith**, this is one of the points that I want you to get today. It was a choice and it was a battle against my instinctual feelings every time that she her symptoms got worse. Worship is a weapon that fights for our faith; prayer is another weapon that also fights for our faith. You know, in that small church, I had brothers and sisters who showed me how to recover step by step my faith. What I mean with that is that every week after a long day of work, I went to church and saw people worshipping God, saw people praying to God, saw people listening and paying attention to God. That helped me to move forward with my situation because faith is a fight and when our faith is down, we have to fight our feelings if we want to win that fight.

The second thing that I learned is this: **remember God's faithfulness.**

After everything that we faced, we faced more delicate and serious situations, but seeing her grow and seeing how God was faithful filled our hearts with positive thoughts, with feelings of victory, and the strength to overcome any situation. This doesn't mean that because you won a battle you win the war. (I had some scars.) We continued pursuing God's will in our lives, every day. We started to pray more, we started to worship God with passion and learn not to worry about the day after, because we knew that God was in control of all. We began to do God's work, to volunteer for anything, to be useful in all the ministries in that little church. And at some point or another, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we began to overcome those feelings of hopelessness and despair and began to really focus in on God's faithfulness.

After that God blessed us with another girl who you also know. Thank God there were no complications with that pregnancy. On the other hand, she was a healthy baby and today she is a wonderful daughter, no complaints about her.

God showed us through those years that my first daughter is a miracle. Today she is a young adult with a lot of gifts. You know, the devil tried to put us down and attack our feelings and our lives with the health of our daughter since she was in my wife's womb. But today, I can see that the miracle has made and continues to make my faith stronger in God because I see God's hands on her; I can see God's faithfulness.

got older and more mature, but now they won't even talk to you.

- You hoped your marriage would be everything you thought it would be; and now you are signing the divorce papers.
- You had hope but your hope disappointed you...the hope left.

And you know when we experience that kind of frustration in our lives, we always ask God **WHY?**

Why is this happening to us?

Why did the doctor give us this diagnosis?

Why has the doctor told me that I have to go through surgery or treatment again?

Why am I still feeling as though I am depressed?

Why does my wife, why does my husband have to suffer that way and why can't I do anything?

Why am I still struggling with this addiction?

Why did my fiancée just call off the engagement?

Why am I so unlucky in life?

Why am I struggling financially?

Why, why, why and ten thousand more why's...

It is really difficult to be in that situation...and what I really want to focus on this morning is what will you do when you are in the middle of a situation that you never chose to be in. How do you deal with the facts of life that make you feel weak and doubt your faith? The facts of life that you never plan for; but in just a blink of an eye you see yourself in the middle of something that you never chose for yourself or for someone else.

This is why I am going to share with you today three things that I have learned throughout my own life and that, honestly, I am still learning, especially in those moments when I felt forsaken by God, just as the travelers felt on their way back to Emmaus, just as Jesus did on the cross.

The first one is fight your feelings.

My wife and I have been married for almost 21 years and we have two precious daughters. Most of you know them. For the most part, a goal that every couple has is to, at some point, have children. Well, in our case, our first-born came early in our marriage. My wife was in her second year of university in Colombia and we

unexpectedly learned that she was pregnant. Thus began the journey, as all moms here know, of learning everything you can about pregnancy.

And not just learning things about babies, but the symptoms that come along with being pregnant, the routines and exercises that moms need to keep up with to keep her body healthy and the baby in a good position, the routine visits to the doctor, prenatal vitamins, etc.... We, Denise and I, were so happy. We were the happiest future parents ever on earth. We started to buy clothes, setting up the room, toys, and decorations.

But one day, when she was 5 ½ months pregnant, I remember her waking up in a horrible amount of pain. We ended up in the hospital because she couldn't hold the baby anymore. Something was happening internally in her body and the doctors couldn't figure out what was going on. It got to the point where I was not able to see my wife, to talk to her, to ask her how she was feeling. The love of my life was behind double doors and I did not have access to the other side. This was what I was feeling (I was 23 years old) but what about her feelings? Lying down on a bed waiting for a nurse or a doctor to let me in and at least give her a word of hope so that she could be calm. After seven days of not seeing her, they finally posted that she would be transferred to a regular room. Long story short, she was in that room for three days, and after those three days she was released – but with tons of conditions. The situation of the baby was secure, but we now had to abide by many restrictions in order to keep it that way.

We faced the facts. Spoke with the doctors, faced the reality of her condition, followed the instructions and recommendations. But a month later, she was taking the bus on her way home from university, and when she was stepping up to get onto the bus a homeless man pulled her down and punched her in her stomach - provoking the exact same thing and even worse than before. By that time, the only question I could ask was WHY? Why was this happening to us? I yelled at God, I complained to God...why? Where were you at that moment? A moment in which we needed God. We were just a young happy married couple with the desire to do God's will in our lives. Our faith was down to the level of no trust. We felt alone, and we felt forsaken by God. After that incident, my first daughter Paula was finally born at thirty-one weeks.

So I came out of that situation very tired but obviously, needing to be strong for my wife, strong for my family, strong for my wife's family. And I wished that my faith could have been stronger but honestly, it wasn't. Even when at the end I had our

baby in my arms, a beautiful baby, I still felt discouraged.

I continued attending church but it was not the same. I felt out of the game for some reason. I did not want to pray, I did not want to be involved in anything in the church. We started to focus on moving forward and raising our daughter. Time passed and we moved from Colombia to here and things began to be a little different. Normal lives, we focused on the "American Dream" for us as immigrants. We worked and worked, accommodating to the new culture. We involved ourselves with the UM denomination, a Hispanic Latin Church that eventually became our home church. And yet, throughout all of this great blessing and opportunity, here I was "struggling with my faith". One day I digging in the Bible and I found a passage in the book of Romans 4:18-22 that says, ¹⁸ *Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be."*¹⁹ *Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead.*²⁰ *Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God,* ²¹ *being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.* ²² *This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness."* This Bible passage was telling me that Abraham also struggled with his faith and he faced the fact of his life, yet continued to believe in God and in God's promises.

I began to really take that word into my life and with time my faith became stronger and stronger. But everything fell down when years later my girl began presenting some health issues. At the beginning we were thinking that those issues were because of the cold weather; but the symptoms that she was presenting were very often not even in winter season and we started to worry. Parts of her body began to paralyze, her hands, her face, and her legs. We took her to the doctors and after numerous tests and appointments the doctors came up with the conclusion that she had an autoimmune disease in her body that was debilitating her more and more every day.

Unfortunately, there was no medicine for that, just a visit every six months to the Children's Hospital in Chicago where every time we took her, they put her in machines with different control panels and extracted a lot of blood to see the reaction of her cells. It was painful to see her connected to monitors and needles. After two years, we didn't see any progress in her health. And here I was, after my faith had begun to strengthen, and now it had started to decline again and again. And always

