

JUNE 1, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON May 18- "Growing Your Hedge" - Job 1:9-10, Job 42:1-6, Matthew 6:12-13

This week we are looking at something that goes hand in hand with last week's message. Last week we discussed the devil, and noted that despite all the fear and paranoia that some Christian traditions have tried to instill, the rubber meets the road in how we handle temptation. Stay strong in faith and genuine discipleship, resist temptation, that's kind of it.

Today we're looking at a long held tradition and expression within our faith. Today we look into praying a "hedge of protection".

This term is very common and tossed out frequently. But what is it? Do we use the expression properly or wisely? What should our expectations be?

It's really found explicitly in the first chapter of Job. But it's not a prayer, or even a request. It's an accusation. The angel in the role of accusing people has returned from its job of running about the world looking to report back to God what is happening. God brags about God's servant Job and how wonderful he is. The angel fires back. "Of course he is! Why wouldn't he be? You've put a 'hedge of protection' around him so nothing bad ever happens. I bet if you let him suffer he'll turn on you!"

Then the bet and the game is on.

We don't know why God chose Job. That doesn't seem to matter. The story of Job is about much bigger things than that. We'll see one of them shortly.

Asking God to watch over us, help us, heal us, keep us safe and so on isn't new, nor is it problematic. Of course we don't want to suffer any more than we have to. We certainly don't want our loved ones to suffer. As much as we are to ask God for what we want and need, we have to be careful about how far we take it and how much authority we proclaim in the asking.

The hedge of protection falls into a category that can cross some lines.

The first issue is that said "hedge" interferes with free will. If the protection that I need involves someone else being forced to do something against their will, we have a problem. I am asking God to take control over another. If that person sins and it's God's forcing them we have another problem. Scripture says to let no one say that they are tempted by God. I would say it's not a stretch to say we shouldn't say God forced us to sin.

If God does then that violates the sense of God as fair and just. Punishing someone for something I force them to do isn't fair or just. We ran into this in Bible study recently when David is punished for following God's instruction to take a census. It takes some speculation and the like to make sense of it because it goes straightly against who we believe God to be.

Here's a freebee along these lines as well. If I leave early or late for something and miss being in an accident that someone else has been in I need to care for how I attribute that. "God kept me from leaving on time because God wanted me alive..." If I say that I better be firmly prepared to look the survivors of someone else who DID die in that accident and say "Gee, I'm sorry...God decided your child needed to die today instead of me."

A hedge of protection gets sticky in this regard.

It's also tricky if I am the one proclaiming it. "I pronounce a hedge of protection over this house! No evil spirit shall enter it! No spirit of discontent, sickness, or malice may enter or reside in this place! Hallelujah!!! (hear this in your favorite ramped up preacher voice)"

Unfortunately the second anything bad happens or is even thought about in that place apparently the hedge no longer works. An argument, a stolen handful of change off a dresser, a cold, whatever it is the hedge had failed in what I've proclaimed it would do. Not asked, proclaimed.

Then we get into the arrogance that I think I can proclaim this. The futility of it when everyone entering has their own free will. And having to make shifty and lame excuses when someone asks why God didn't honor the commitment I made on God's behalf.

When this prayer is treated in this way, it doesn't sound at all like a prayer. It sounds like a spell that you'd find in any kind of witchcraft or like sensibility. Look up a basic protections spell and the language isn't terribly off from what you hear Christians pray with a hedge of protection. We talk about the superstition of crystals or hex bags and the like. Yet Christians wear their cross necklaces and feel it keeps them safe. One of the advertising strategies for this jewelry that has the Bible entirely engraved on it in ridiculously tiny, unreadable print is have someone put it on and say "I feel protected all the time now that I can wear the word of God!"

It's the exact same thing with different trappings. We don't get to call this kind of thing down from heaven on a whim. And there's reasons for it. Some we've already seen.

The book of Job itself gives us a warning about being too protected. It comes at the end. Job says "I know that you can do all things;

no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

3 You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?'

Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me to know.

4 "You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak;

I will question you,
and you shall answer me.'

5 My ears had heard of you
but now my eyes have seen you.

6 Therefore I despise myself
and repent in dust and ashes."

This is in response to God giving Job a humbling "talking to" about all that God is, and all that Job doesn't know, can't fathom, and can't begin to imagine doing.

The message here is that in Job's "protected status" his understanding of God was actually quite shallow. He never had a reason to dive deeper into how life worked, God's place in it, and having to intentionally know and rely on God. It wasn't until he learned what it was to suffer that he could begin to grasp all that he didn't understand. It wasn't until he experienced suffering that he could appreciate God.

Isn't it the same with us? When things are easy it's easy to forget who God is. It's easy to let our faith slip into complacency and even apathy. We see this often criticized. When things are bad run to God. When things are good forget about God, just live life, and return when we need something again.

My experience has shown that the less hardship we experience the less we identify with people who are experiencing their own hardship. The less understanding and compassionate we tend to be. In other words, a charmed life insulates us from the experience necessary to love our neighbor most fully and deeply.

Of course this isn't one hundred percent. The trend, however, seems to hold. There is a reason that Jesus words in an interaction with one of his devoted followers:

Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."

When we know what it is to fail, to want, to need, etc. we understand others who do as well. We love better and more.

Naturally none of us want to suffer. At the same time, avoiding it, refusing to acknowledge it builds a wall between us and God.

I said we'd get imminently practical again today. What else can we pray or do to keep the idea of a hedge of protection in it's proper place? Again, asking for safety and deliverance makes sense, we simply need to keep our spiritual eyes open and ears tuned to what God is really doing in the world and

how we understand it in our faith, belief, and lives.

The Lord's prayer passage we heard is a good place to start.

Forgive us as we forgive. This acknowledges squarely that we make mistakes. Our experience isn't perfect. We need God to forgive us. It also reminds us to have grace with others who have made mistakes themselves. It connects us in our humanness even as it uplifts us in our spirituality.

The arrogance that comes from hiding from our own sin and the resentment and bitterness that come from being unforgiving are the sources of so much in our hearts and lives that cause problems and damage. We are asking God in these moments of prayer to protect us from the destruction of our own potential attitudes and the actions and words that follow from them.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil is a prayer that asks another, similar, layer of protection. Give us the awareness to spot temptation when it is knocking at the door. Deliver us from those urges and desires that try to seduce us into following the wrong path.

Note in both of these passages we aren't asking God to magically stop things from happening. What we are asking is to walk and work hand in hand with God to handle whatever is before us.

With this I would offer one more practice that coupled with prayer is a grounded way to deal with the bad experiences that come our way as well as avoid creating them ourselves.

Find a circle of people that will help us stay on the right path with God. Welcome relationships that challenge us when our opinions and values are out of step with Christ. Value relationships with people who will tell us when we're speaking, acting, and choosing wrongly.

These aren't the only relationships we forge. Otherwise we'd never be around the folks who need to hear the gospel. They are the relationships that help us make sure our lives reflect the gospel we speak.

To put it in the image of an actual hedge, think about the way we orchestrate our lives in these terms.

There are hedges that are barriers to whatever lies outside the borders of a yard. At the same time the way they are cultivated has a beauty and welcome. They serve an intentional purpose and at the same time are inviting.

There are other hedges that are hostile. They not only serve as a barrier to whatever lies outside the borders of the yard but are almost hostile. They have signs on them that say "keep out" and "trespassers not welcome". Even people who are invited to the front door feel uncomfortable having to pass beyond the airtight, exclusive border.

Expecting God to magically keep any and all problems and bad experiences from our lives is the second. Were God to honor it we would be shielded completely from the world and people around us. That would be the only way for the hedge to be truly and completely upheld.

Taking the responsibility to own our lives and ask God to partner with us in building relationships and habits that keep us focused rightly and handle troubles that come our way properly is the first. With the Spirit's help we have perspectives and people around us to help us make the choices that naturally create safe and good outcomes. When something outside our control impacts us with tragedy or a problem we have an attitude and a circle of friends and family that walk with us through the circumstance.

At the same time our lives are created in ways that are beautiful and inspiring. Our spirits are inviting and welcome not just to those like us but to all. We are genuine lights of Christ shining brightly in the world.

It takes work to create this kind of "hedge". It takes active, daily partnering with God rather than some one and done prayer. It's also worth it. Like Job found out, the dark experiences show us aspects of life, one another, and the depth our relationship with God can attain that a life of ease alone never will. That fullness of faith and life makes for the greatest, most impacting and rich experience of our journey and makes the most of the witness we are called to have in a hurting and broken world.

BIBLE STUDY 2 Samuel 24

This closing chapter of 2 Samuel is interesting and has a few nuggets worth considering. It begins with a story of the God being upset with Israel. Why? We don't know. Whatever it was it prompted God to ask David to take a census.

There are a few things noteworthy about HOW the census was taken and what happened beforehand. David asked the military to be the ones to do it. Joab, and apparently other commanders, objected. They knew inherently that David's track record and the expectation of Israel was to forget statistics and just trust in God. Taking a census smacked of a lack of trust in the LORD. David overruled the objections.

The military being the ones to have to do it is also telling. When Israel asked for a king, God warned them. They were told that a king would exact taxes and force their children and children's children into labor. A king "like the other nations" wasn't a king they wanted. What would the Israelites have suspected might be waiting in the wings with a census?

A census was more than just fighting men. It was an inventory of all the nation. This could be used for taxing purposes as well as knowing how much labor a king had on hand for his projects. A census was more than numbers. It was an opportunity to exploit the most precious resources of any nation. Its people.

Right now we are seeing this in our own culture wars. The information being gleaned from sensitive government databases is concerning to many. What will this information be used for? The trusting see it will be used for benign purposes. The suspicious fear it will be used to exploit and control. This conflict is as old as there has been governments and leaders over people.

Solomon demonstrated this in his reign. He is known for the building of the temple as well as major improvements in Israel's infrastructure. How did this come about? In no small part to heavy and burdensome taxes on the people as well as forcing portions of the population into service. If there were fears that required a military presence to accomplish a census, over time those fears would prove founded.

Once the census is taken something odd happens. We get why David would insist on it with the military, God told him to do it. As the numbers roll in, suddenly David has an attack of conscience that he has sinned. God agrees and the prophet Gad comes to figure out the penalty for that sin. Didn't God ask David to take the census? If so, and God is just and fair, how can David be punished for doing what God asked him to do?

A simple answer is to go to 1 Chronicles where the writer substitutes Satan for God as to the originator of the command for a census. If we acknowledge this then we have an easy out that Satan caused David to sin. On the other hand we now have to contend with a contradiction in scripture. 2 Samuel clearly puts the origin of the command squarely on God.

If in fact it was God, how do we square the sin of it? For that we have to do what we do with the story of Balaam in Numbers to an extent. In both God has either permitted or commanded an action that is then considered sinful and wrong.

The scripture doesn't make it easy by giving us a quick explanation, however some simple speculation does make the ground up. It also is in concert with human nature.

It is highly possible that both Balaam and David heard God's voice correctly. It's also possible that in the course of doing what they were to do something in their heart changed. For Balaam he was being offered a great reward by a king to pronounce a curse over Israel. He said he'd go to the king but only do what God instructed. Is it possible that as he set out the allure of treasure and fame with the king overcame him? Is it possible that he repurposed his heart to please the king and curse Israel rather than please God and bless them? If so, we understand why Balaam's journey was seen as an affront to God.

Similarly, is the following possible? Is it possible that upon realizing his strength in numbers David's ego came into the picture? Could he have been tempted to begin acting on his own accord and strength rather than leaning on God? Could he have had in mind the exploitation that Solomon would

later use? If the answer is yes, then we can see where God might look upon David as having sinned.

In an unusual turn of events, David gets to choose the penalty. Will it be famine, war, or disease? David's faithfulness resurfaces and his true heart comes to the front.

Rather than trust in the strength of his own forces in war, he says he will lean on God's mercy. God chooses between famine and disease. Disease, three days of it is the decision.

Many people die. As the pestilence reaches Jerusalem it pauses and David encounters the angel sent to deal the punishment out. There is the sense that the time was something less than a full three days when the disease comes to a halt. David leaning on God's mercy was wise.

He also pleads with the angel. David owns the sin and asks any further punishment be meted out on his family and not the innocent people of Israel. The penalty is done.

In thanks David offers sacrifice. He does it on a threshing floor owned by another. The owner offers to donate the site and the materials for the sacrifice. David again shows his faithfulness and will not give a meaningless offering. It isn't sacrifice for his own sin if it costs him nothing. David pays for everything and offers the sacrifice which seals the deal with the end of the punishment.

This site of the threshing floor is now secured and will be the location of the temple Solomon builds to God.

What does all of this show us? It reminds us at the end of 2 Samuel that even in his error, David still has a very real sense of God and his faith is never far from the surface. He recognizes his sin and owns that he deserves a punishment. When given an option between surviving a fight with man or just leaning on God's mercy he chooses God's mercy. When God's mercy is ready to relent, David takes ownership of the penalty in asking any further punishment be given to him and his family. Spare those who had nothing to do with his sin. In his sacrifice he shows an understanding of sacrifice and its depth. It will be personal or it will be nothing.

1 Kings will finish David's life. Chronicles rehashes some of this book as well with a few other details here and there. In the end, the books of Samuel leave us with a character and image of arguably Israel's greatest king. The greatest lesson of David is that no matter how far we fall, we can always return to and faithfully entrust ourselves to God. God is never far, and faith and restoration is but a prayer and repentance away.