

July 5

The holiday's over; let's get on with our own lives. Is that the attitude for this morning after?

Real history: Did the signing of the Declaration mean the struggle for freedom was over? No, after the Declaration came five years of war and no cake walk to independence. Stab us in the back, the colonies balked at sending more troops and more money for the war effort. Despite such stuff, Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown in 1781. Is it over now? No. The British are expected to regroup and attack again, so the American army has to stay intact. Easier said than done. Congress (God bless 'em) isn't coming through with money, so some senior army officers plot a military coup. In the speech of his life, Washington persuades them not to do it. Finally a peace treaty is signed in 1783. Is it over now? No, but my space is running out. Those first years show that the whole thing, this country and form of government we celebrate, could easily have fallen apart at many points. It's never over. Liberty is a life-long labor. Got that? Liberty is a life-long labor.

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July 7

When I was a kid, my fingers used to break out. Some ointments helped a bit, but not much. It turned out to be from nerves, from worrying about things. I grew out of it, maybe matured out of it, until one night during the Fourth of July break. I woke up in the middle of the night scratching a couple fingers furiously. I was

worrying about something at the seminary, afraid that it wouldn't turn out right, and so my digital barometer, my fingers, registered the storm in my soul.

A day or two later my morning devotion took me to Psalm 37:8, "Do not fret – it only leads to evil." "Yeah, that's true," I thought, "but..." Diane and I had been away from campus. When we came back, I opened my e-mails and found that my co-workers had already tackled the task that had me worried. "Do not fret – it only leads to evil." (Repetition is the mother of learning).

Oswald Chambers: "Have you been bolstering up that stupid soul of yours with the idea that your circumstances are too much for God? Put all your 'supposing' on one side and dwell in the shadow of the Almighty. Deliberately tell God that you will not fret about that thing. All our fret and worry is caused by calculating without God."

July 10

On this date in 1804 Vice President Aaron Burr killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel. Burr, always an enigmatic and often a troublesome political figure, was indicted three years later for treason. "Aaron Burr...being...under the protection of the laws of the United States, and owing allegiance... (thereto), not having the fear of God before his eyes, but being moved and seduced by the instigation of the devil..." So read the charge. (James F. Simon, What Kind of Nation, p. 245)

"We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10).

What would happen if more people in government and business were mindful that they will appear in that judgment on that day, the last day? How many relationships would be better off, how many marriages preserved, how many lives brought into the world and cared for.... How different so much would be in your life and mine if we lived each day mindful that "We must all appear!"

The Bible teaches that our only hope at judgment is Jesus. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). That final deliverance, however, is not a blank check to do our will rather than God's. That's the highest treason.

July 11

The White House will announce today that tax receipts have increased greatly in the last year, about \$250 billion more taken in this year than last year. The reason for the big increase is taxes from business, an increase the New York Times calls "surprising." The result will be a lower federal deficit. In 2004 the federal deficit was a record \$412 billion. Experts say it could be reduced to about \$300 billion this year.

Money demonstrates a tension for followers of Christ. We usually acquire money as a result of work or smarts. That's the principle of the Law at work, the principle that says, "Do this (whatever this happens to be) and you will prosper." This principle is an integral part of daily life. Unfortunately, that formula isn't enough to satisfy God's expectation that we be holy. So another truth comes into the Christian life, the

Gospel, the principle that God accepts us because of the merits of Christ, when we trust in Jesus. This grace totally disregards our works, even the successful efforts that have resulted in financial gain and a nice life. So the Christian lives in a tension, working for money and yet basing life on the gift of grace. At a personal level, balancing those two can be as difficult as reducing the federal deficit!

July 12

The American League did it again last night, taking its ninth All-Star game in a row. Joe Buck and Tim McCarver described the players in glowing terms, true stars. And when the National League was on the verge of winning the game 2-1 with two out in the bottom of the ninth, the American League came back to win. That's why they're called stars.

The Bible knows nothing about baseball All Stars but it does describe more important stars. Daniel 12:2-3: "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever."

Philippians 2:13-16: "It is God who works in you to will and to do according to His good purpose. Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life."

I fell asleep in my easy chair and missed the baseball stars shining in the bottom of the ninth. Let's not miss our chance to shine like stars today.

July 13

Today's Minute is a "thumbs up" for God.

God is so mysterious, so unseen, that even believers sometimes wonder if He really exists. Maybe we're trying to peer too far into the universe. Consider the following words from world famous doctor Paul Brand, quoted by Philip Yancey in Soul Survivor. "For several years our team worked specifically with the pain system of the human hand, trying to find ways to protect the hands of leprosy patients who can no longer feel pain. What engineering perfection we find there! All (our) techniques correct the deviants, the one hand in a hundred that is not functioning as God designed. But we have found no way to improve on the hand God gave us. We wonder at the genius of Beethoven, but we have forgotten to wonder at the mystery behind the human hand that plays the sonatas he composed. After operating on thousands of hands, I must agree with Isaac Newton, 'In the absence of any other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God's existence.'" (p. 14f.)

So next time you're wondering about God, twiddle your thumbs. Poet Walter Chalmers Smith put it this way, "All laud we would render: O help us to see 'Tis only the splendor of light that hides Thee!"

July 14

This is a summer advisory. Please be alert to the possibility that your summer is speeding by, already half gone, without some significant down time.

Remember when kids chased after the milkman to get some ice or after the Good Humor truck for ice cream? Remember when you played ball or dolls or rode your bike or climbed a tree? Stay inside with the computer? Are you crazy? Remember when cutting the lawn wasn't hired out to a company but to a kid? Sometimes he used a push mower! Remember when it got so hot you slept on the floor near the front door because that was the best place to catch a bit of breeze? Remember when you got bored? Your parents didn't go into a panic and come up with things for you to do. You got bored...they wisely let you be bored...and you got better acquainted with the second most important person in your life, yourself. And remember when summer's down time gave you time with the most important person, your God, your Creator, your Savior?

This has been an alert. Slow down your summer!

July 17

How do you tough it out? Competitors in the Tour de France willingly take on grueling rides through the mountains. Ride a bike uphill in the mountains? Most of us don't even take the stairs! So much in life softens us, doesn't harden us to face the tough times.

"What makes a great endurance athlete is the ability to absorb potential embarrassment, and to suffer without complaint. If it was a suffer-fest, I was good at it." (Lance Armstrong, *It's Not about the Bike*, p. 24). Lance Armstrong drew on his own resources to win. For your "suffer-fests," model yourself after the One called the "Suffering Servant" in the prophets, that God's Son Jesus. Do more than look to Him as a model; look to Him as Savior for time and for eternity. When resignation and defeat seem to be your only prospect, He says, "my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). "With God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

"We know that suffering creates endurance, endurance creates character, and character creates confidence. We're not ashamed to have this confidence, because God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit" (Romans 5:3-5).

Spirit of God, in this week's "suffer-fests," carry me to victory. Amen.

July 18

Can the crisis be calmed? Hezbollah rockets are hitting deep into Israel and Israeli fighters retaliating by bombing Lebanon to the north and Gaza to their west. The death toll climbs by the day. Syria and Iran make the situation especially dangerous, lurking with purpose in the dark shadows, helping Hezbollah and Hamas and thereby making all-out regional war possible.

Meanwhile world leaders met in St. Petersburg and crafted a statement that says little but reveals much. "These extremist elements and those who support them cannot be allowed to plunge the Middle East into chaos and provoke a wider conflict.

The extremists must immediately halt their attacks." Everyone knows the "extremists" will do whatever they want. What the leaders revealed through their negotiations in crafting that innocuous statement is that each world power looks on the crisis from the perspective of advancing its own national interests. No self-denial here for the good of the world.

Even in this there is a demonstration of God's multi-faceted love for people. When a world leader looks primarily to the interests of his own nation, he is protecting the interests of his citizens. That's government's job according to Romans 13. Extremists will do whatever they want but imagine the greater harm to citizens if world leaders got together only to sing Kumbaya!

July 19

Politicians in Washington D.C. are debating the pros and cons of embryonic stem cell research. While all hope that stem cells will lead to cures for diseases, there is a moral debate whether it's right or wrong to extract stem cells from embryos and thus destroy...what? Destroy a new developing human life or just a potential human life?

Here is some information as you form a knowledgeable opinion on this topic. Writes biochemist and biologist Dr. Dianne Irving: "The question...when the physical material dimension of a human being begins via sexual reproduction is strictly a scientific question, and fundamentally should be answered by human embryologists – not by philosophers, bioethicists, theologians...."

A pamphlet called "Stem Cell Research: Understanding the Basics" passes along this definition. "Zygote: This cell results from the union of an oocyte and a sperm. A zygote is the beginning of a new human being." A second scientific opinion: "It is the consensus of nomina embryologica, an international board that determines the correct terminology to be used in human embryology textbooks, that human life begins at conception." The pamphlet then draws this conclusion: "It is then an established biological fact that at the moment of conception it is not a potential human being, but a unique human being with potential." (from Lutherans for Life; www.lutheransforlife.org).

You are forming a knowledgeable opinion, aren't you?

July 24

Yesterday in church we did the ritual confession. "Most merciful God, we confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean. We have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed," etc. etc. Some words in that ritual stopped me cold. "We justly deserve your present and eternal punishment."

The storms that struck Missouri and Illinois weren't Katrina, but were still bad enough that President Bush declared the region a federal disaster area. Over half a million homes were without power; many still are. The dollar cost will be great and several lives were lost. This qualifies as "present punishment".

When I had told a friend about the damage to the seminary campus, he said, "The Lord be with you." I said, "He was...with His alien presence." Sometimes God doesn't do the gentle things we'd expect; He comes to us in ways that seem alien to our expectations of a good God. Still we trust His goodness, interpreting these alien events as the Father's tough love to draw us to greater dependence upon Him. "The Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son." (Proverbs 3:11,12) Hebrews 12:5 gets to the heart of "present punishment," "Do not lose heart when He rebukes you."

Even in suffering, especially in suffering, the Lord is with you.

July 25

The inevitable blame game is starting to play. Katrina, Iraq, Israel, Hezbollah, New York in the wake of its blackout, St. Louis after the storms...Criticism and some calling for heads. What's being said may well be true but some people are probably being criticized unjustly. How do you handle it when you're unjustly criticized?

A friend once told me how I was being blamed for something that had happened. With a rush of anger, I said they're ignorant because the facts don't support the accusation. "Invincible ignorance" and old professor of mine called it, and life is full of people who can't be conquered with the truth. Still, the sting smarts.

The author of Psalm 69 had been unjustly charged with some kind of theft. "Those who hate me for no reason outnumber the hairs on my head. Those who want to destroy me are mighty. They have no reason to be my enemies. I am forced to pay back what I did not steal" (v.4).

Assuming your critics are wrong...sometimes that's an unwarranted assumption...your vindication may not come on this side of eternity. "So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good" (1 Peter 4:19). If their ignorance is invincible, pray to God that your pride isn't.

July 26

The media treats embryonic stem cell debate as last week's news but we shouldn't drop it from our thoughts.

Dr. Dianne Irving: "The question...when the physical material dimension of a human being begins...is strictly a scientific question, and fundamentally should be answered by human embryologists – not by philosophers, bioethicists, theologians..."

That doesn't mean we disregard biblical insights. "Stem Cell Research: Understanding the Basics" cites two Bible passages with comment. "'Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is His reward' (Psalm 127:3). By definition, an inheritance is a gift whose recipients are dictated solely by the giver. 'Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me' (Psalm 51:5). Since we are sinful from the moment of conception, then we must be human beings at the moment of conception."

Opponents of embryonic stem cell research are often reproached for being hard-hearted, caring more about conservative ideology than about people. But opponents aren't against stem cell research. Stem cells from adults "differentiate into pretty much everything that an embryonic stem cell can differentiate into" (in "Stem Cell Research," from "New Scientist," January, 2002). The reproach is itself an example of a less than fully-formed opinion.

The media has left the topic. I hope you haven't.

July 27

Cardinal George of Chicago is undergoing surgery today. The 69-year-old Roman Catholic archbishop was diagnosed with bladder cancer and so everything goes on hold while this disease is attacked. Better that I say "almost everything goes on hold" because the Cardinal's inner thoughts don't stop. Neither would yours if you or a loved one has been diagnosed with something serious, something taking you to the hospital, something with an uncertain outcome. Your thoughts don't go on hold at such times; they kick into high gear.

What do your supercharged thoughts think then? Most Christians will turn to God with prayers for successful treatment. I'd hope to have that spirit of supplication when I myself hear such a diagnosis. But over the years, I've learned that there is another response, one more desirable. Strange as it sounds, I'd hope to have an attitude of "what an opportunity!" I'm being stripped of my reliance on anyone or anything except God. However the medical treatment goes, it's a time when you are forced to focus on what Jesus called "the one thing needful" (Luke 10:42). When you think of where you will be a hundred years from now, isn't that forced purifying of your affections the best outcome of all?

Our best to Cardinal George. Our best to you when illness challenges your faith.

July 28

A wonderful woman named Erna Rubin told about one of her favorite childhood pleasures. "One of my favorite activities was the church picnic the first Sunday in June. The men played horseshoes and the women sat around and talked. There were booths with different things, but my favorite stand was the one with ice cream. Ice cream would cost 5 cents for one scoop, and I got to buy a cone with one scoop. It was too expensive to buy it often. I liked the pointed sugar cones so I could bite off the end and suck the ice cream out of the bottom."

Erna knew how to enjoy the good things of life, the simple, commonplace things like a 5 cent cone. If you stop and think about it, these little common things are really the things that we treasure as we get older and hopefully wiser. "You will eat the fruit of your labor" (Psalm 128:2).

Have a safe and relaxing weekend; the summer, you know, is quickly drawing to a close. Enjoy the simple things, leave some work and worry for next week...and have an ice cream cone.

"Carpe diem," "seize the day," said the Roman poet Horace. Jesus promises that your heavenly Father knows what you need (Matthew 6:32).

July 31

I think the scientific name is lycoris squamigera, but one of its popular names is "surprise lily." In early spring this bulb sends up long, slender leaves that turn brown in late spring and die off. The ground is bare until, surprise! Last week I walked into the yard and was surprised to see stems popped up that soon will open with delicate pink flowers.

I've also heard it called the "resurrection lily" because Christians say it's like, like, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christians use these "like" comparisons all the time. The telephone pole is "like" the cross of Christ and reminds us of His death for our sins. What bothers me about these "like" comparisons is their subjectivity. A telephone pole is a telephone pole, not a cross, and a botanist will say the resurrection lily is just nature.

Sometimes God doesn't need to be explained with "like." Just look at a flower and know that you're looking right at a work of God. "Ye flowers, so wondrous, sweet and fair, ye live to show His praise alone." Pious comparisons are not always necessary and spiritual maturity can see more in the real world than turning crosses into telephone poles. The splendor of the Creator is right in front of our face, if only we'll let ourselves be...surprised by God.