

What I Did On My Summer Vacation

Big Idea: Are we using God or are we letting God use us?

Related Scriptures: Deuteronomy 8:12-14; Isaiah 29:16; 30:15; Jeremiah 2:13; Hosea 13:4; Mark 10:33-35

Good morning. It's great to be back. Some of you may have noticed that I haven't been around for about a month. I've been off. Way off. For the past three or four years, I've taken a month off from preaching in the summer, usually in July. The purpose is to rest, reflect, refocus, and plan. Today, I want to tell you what I did on my summer vacation.

I say "vacation" because it's sort of a vacation. But it's sort of not. Nobody has placed this expectation on me, but when it comes to my summer break, I do feel the pressure of being cast in the role of Moses going up to Mount Sinai to meet with God and then coming down with God's instructions on stone tablets. Not that I put myself in league with Moses—no—but I do feel like people are sort of expecting some direction from me after my break. What did God say? What did you learn? What's the word?

Well, turns out I did go up to the mountain. Not Sinai. Colorado. And I did experience the presence and beauty of God. Let me show you a few ► photos took. (The guy in that photo is not God; he's my fishing buddy, John Gemmill.) So, ► yes, I did go up on the mountain, but I didn't come down with answers on stone tablets. In fact, what I came down with was something I didn't expect. It was a total surprise to me. I'll get to that in a minute.

You see, I'd been praying ► the prayer of Jabez just like we learned before my break: Lord take me, use me, help me, protect me. But secretly, I was tacking on a little personalized addendum: Lord, take me, use me, help me, protect me, *after I've had time to rest*. I was pooped and a little numbed out.

In fact, ► it was a couple of weeks before I could do any weighty reading. My neurons were just not up anything more substantive than the newspaper and some magazines. Apart from the Bible, the first nonfiction book I picked up was ► *The Jesus Way* by Eugene Peterson. It was there that one little line, one little question on Page 53 jumped out and clobbered me. It might as well have been a stone tablet. But instead of the Ten Commandments, there was just one question. It's such a simple question. But also a haunting one. It is now indelibly etched in my mind. Here's the ► question: ". . . Are we using God or are we letting God use us?"¹ Are we using God or are we letting God use us?

Maybe the reason it jumped out to me is that I had been praying ► the Jabez prayer which includes "use me." It's as if God was saying, "Hold on there, Bob. You've been mouthing the words, "use me," but I want to test your heart on this. Who's using who? Are you using Me or are you letting me use you?"

And God kept on asking the question in various ways. For example, I read on in Peterson's book and the same question was ► rephrased: "Is God a mystery of goodness whom we embrace and trust, or is God a formula for getting the most out of life on our terms?"² That last part was piercing: ". . . is God a

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 53.

² Peterson, 54.

formula for getting the most out of life on our terms?”

You say, ► “That’s nice, Bob, but you’re a Bible guy and we’re a Bible church, and you’re always talking about applying the Bible to our lives, so what about that?”

Hang on. There’s more. I’ve been trying to read through the Bible in a year using one of those daily plans, and a day or two after I got the haunting question about who’s using who, my reading plan leads me to ► Hosea 13:4-6, where the Lord speaks to the Israelites after He had liberated them and brought them to the Promised Land. He says,

^{NLT} Hosea 13:4 “I have been the LORD your God ever since I brought you out of Egypt. You must acknowledge no God but me, for there is no other savior. 5 I took care of you in the wilderness, in that dry and thirsty land. 6 But when you had eaten and were satisfied, you became proud and forgot me.

Have I become proud and forgotten God? To forget God is to ignore what He wants.³ To become proud and forget God is to focus mostly on getting what I want, forgetting what God wants. And God starts to look more like my butler than my Boss. Back ► to the same question: Are we using God or are we letting God use us?

A day or two later, my reading plan took me to ► Isaiah 29:16. God says to the Israelites,

^{NET} Isaiah 29:16 Your thinking is perverse! Should the potter be regarded as clay? Should the thing made say about its maker, “He didn’t make me”? Or should the pottery say about the potter, “He doesn’t understand”?

Who’s the potter and who’s the clay? Do I think I have the better understanding of how my life should go? Who’s using who? Back ► to the same question: Are we using God or are we letting God use us?

And then, my reading plan took me to ► Isaiah 30:15-16—some verses that I referenced in a sermon just before my summer break. It says,

^{NET} Isaiah 30:15 For this is what the master, the LORD, the Holy One of Israel says: “If you repented and patiently waited for me, you would be delivered; if you calmly trusted in me you would find strength, but you are unwilling. 16 You say, ‘No, we will flee on horses,’ so you will indeed flee. You say, ‘We will ride on fast horses,’ so your pursuers will be fast.”

In the midst of situations where following the Lord poses a risk, a threat, a danger—too much time, or too much effort, or too much money, or too much pain, or too much sacrifice—am I willing to calmly, patiently trust in God and follow anyway? Or do I resort to my own anxious ways of running and self protection—fast horses, or fast credit, or fast schedules, or fast excuses? Are ► we using God or are we letting God use us?

³ See for example Deuteronomy 8:12-14.

And just last Thursday, the relentless reading plan kept it coming. It took me to ► Jeremiah 2:13, where God says,

^{NET} Jeremiah 2:13 “. . . my people have committed a double wrong: they have rejected me, the fountain of life-giving water, and they have dug cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns which cannot even hold water.”

God, the fountain of life-giving water gives me the water I need, but I have to trust Him daily for it. I can't hoard it. I can't manage it. I can't control it. But sometimes I don't like to trust; I'd rather try to hoard, to manage, to control. So, I forsake the fountain I can't control for something I think I can: a hole in the ground I dig for myself, a muddy cistern—my plans, my agenda, my life, my comfort zone, my system—and I pray that God will bless me and fill up my muddy cistern. But the Lord says no. They are “cracked cisterns which cannot even hold water.” Are ► we using God or are we letting God use us?

I suspect the answer is not tidy. It's not all one or the other. There's a mix. Sometimes I use God. Other times I allow Him to use me. Sometimes I vacillate within the same day or even the same hour.

If you find that you are using God, you're not alone. In fact, you're in pretty good company. Pastors like me can use God. In fact, we can be some of the most skilled users. After all, paychecks are involved.

And some of the greatest heroes of the faith used God. Consider two of the original twelve apostles, James and John. There they were with Jesus as He was headed for Jerusalem to be crucified. As recorded in ► Mark 10:33-34, Jesus told them:

^{NET} Mark 10:33 “Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and experts in the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles. 34 They will mock him, spit on him, flog him severely, and kill him. Yet after three days, he will rise again.”

At the heels of this poignant prophecy, you'd think that maybe these spiritual heavyweights, James and John, would say something like, “Wow, why are you allowing this to happen? Is this part of Your plan? Is this what you want? How can we help? How do You want to use us? We're here for You.”

But that's not what they say. They have some growing up to do. Jesus pours out His heart and James and John say, in effect, “Yeah, mock, spit, flog, kill, rise again, whatever. But hey Jesus, what we'd really appreciate is to be able to use you to get whatever we want.” Mark ► 10:35 records it:

^{NET} Mark 10:35 Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him and said, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

They were trying to use God. You see, no matter who you are, you're fully capable of trying to use God. But it doesn't work. Our clay is not the Potter. Our horses are not fast enough. Our cisterns don't hold water.

And ► what about us, the church? Are we using God or are we letting God use us? Again, I suspect there's a mix. In some ways, God does seem to be using us. I love this church, and there are some wonderful things happening here. Let me read you an email I got just last week.

At the end of January, almost eight months ago (time flies when you have such wonderful spiritual support from family and friends!); I discovered a lump in my left breast. In the blink of an eye, I found myself in recovery following surgery for a double mastectomy. Weeks later I started chemotherapy.

What happened next is evidence of just how wondrous and strong is the work of our Lord. He touched me so deeply I have never felt so loved – and full of love – in my life. He brought me support through the congregation at Moon Valley Bible Church and beyond. The support came in so many ways and from so many different directions, His blessings seemed never-ending. As news of my battle against cancer spread to our family and friends, I was added to so many prayer lists, I lost count.

During my surgery I had a waiting room full of friends and supporters – family, neighbors, friends from work, and Life Group members. Little did I know their presence and their love were just the beginning. Once home, meals came every night, along with heartfelt prayers and loving support. One day, a group from Moon Valley Bible Church dropped by to do a complete house-cleaning! The love and support were endless and so appreciated.

Shortly after starting chemo, I ended up back in the hospital. My husband, Dave, was on a church mission in Mississippi, so the Don and Chris Hammond Life Group jumped into action. The group, and many other wonderful people, stayed by my side, attending to my needs and offering their valued support. Their supports, and my growth in Christ, were the most wonderful ingredients in a recipe for recovery.

I am reminded through all of this, why it is best to do life in groups. I am reminded through all of this how I have grown in Christ these years, thanks to family, friends, Moon Valley Bible Church, and the Hammond Life Group. I have never once felt alone in this challenge, nor have I felt afraid of what lies ahead – I know that God has been with me every step.

I am excited about my future and I look forward to spending it with all of you by my side.

*God Bless,
Kathy Chapman*

Wow! That is some great stuff. God has used us. And there are many other stories of God's work that could be told.

But Moon Valley Bible Church is a little like my yard. Last summer, I re-landscaped. I have eleven different kinds of plants in my front yard. Some of the plants are doing great; I've never had to do anything special with them. They're healthy and they just thrive. Others need a little more attention and feeding. And still others have died and I've had to experiment with different replacement plants because

some parts of the yard get full sun; others get very little.

Just as my front yard has different plants; Moon Valley has different ministries. Some are flourishing; others are frail. And I wonder if we've just been complacently coasting in some areas. And it's not that I came back from vacation cranky. In fact, I'm very excited—excited for what God has in store for us. I just don't quite know what it is yet. Right now, I've got more questions than answers.

Questions like why aren't we growing more at Moon Valley? If God loves people⁴, and if God has commanded us to reach out,⁵ and if the Lord is committed to building His church,⁶ then it seems like we ought to be growing more. If we closed our doors, would anybody outside our church notice? Are we so good for the community, so attractive, that people would be saddened?

We've never been into numbers all that much, but I'm sensing that we've plateaued, we're treading water, we've leveled out, we're somehow stuck in a rut.

I have a picture of it. I've been hiking Shaw Butte lately, just south of the Moon Valley area. The ► first part of the hike is pretty flat for maybe two miles. Then you climb the backside; the rocky switchbacks take you and your heart rate skyward. On ► top, you take in a beautiful view of the Moon Valley community. But you can't take in Moon Valley unless you climb. There is no pinnacle without pain. Somehow, we need to climb. We're on the flat part. And I guess there are worse places to be. It sure beats vegging on the couch. But I'm done with the flat part. I'm ready to climb.

But how do we climb? Where do we climb? I'm not quite sure yet. I don't have details. I told you I have more questions than answers right now. And it's certainly not all up to me. But I can say a few things. I don't expect to be uprooting ministries that are growing well. I don't expect Life Groups to cease being the life blood of our church. And I certainly don't expect to somehow deemphasize the application of the Bible to our lives.

But I do expect to grow. And it starts not with programs or policies or platitudes. It starts with people—you and me—asking the question: Am I using God or am I allowing God to use me? And as a close follow up, I'm going to pray ► this prayer daily: "Lord, make me aware of how You want to use me today." This is really just an emphasis or expansion upon the "use-me" part of the Jabez prayer. "Lord, make me aware of how You want to use me today."

Notice what I'm not going to be praying. I'm not praying, "Lord, I have a long list of things I want to do today; help me get through it." I'm not praying, "Lord, bless my plans." I'm not praying, "Lord, make my horses run faster." I'm not praying, "Lord, fill up my cistern." No. He's the Boss. He's the Potter. He's the fountain of life-giving water. I repent of using Him; I want to be used by Him. "Lord, make me aware of how You want to use me today." This could change everything. It could turn annoying interruptions into divine appointments. It could turn afflictions into assignments. It could turn your job into your ministry.

⁴ 2 Peter 3:9.

⁵ Luke 14:23.

⁶ Matthew 16:18.

In the weeks and months ahead, Moon Valley leaders and staff will also be zooming out a little to prayerfully ask: “Lord, make us aware of how You want to use this church from now on.” And in this vein, another interesting thing happened on my summer break. Some of you know that I am slowly pursuing my doctorate. During my break, I looked online to see what my next class is going to be. Turns out it’s a class called “Biblical Church Growth and Change.” The in-class part of it is coming up on October, but I’ve already started the pre-class work. I’ve got to read 3,000 pages from recent books relating to church growth and change. And I’ve got to do an in-depth evaluation of Moon Valley Bible Church and the stated purpose of the evaluation, according to the class materials, is to serve as “a basis for discovering what He [God] wants to do through you in the future.”⁷ This is no coincidence. This is an affirmation to me that it is indeed time for us to reevaluate and refocus as a church. As we prayerfully seek God’s agenda, we’ll certainly keep you posted on what the Lord reveals to us, and I invite you to keep us posted on what God reveals to you. We’re in this together.

It may be a little frustrating for you to hear me raise questions without answers. It’s un-Moses-like. No stone tablets. But I believe this, too, is of the Lord. I sense that whatever the Lord has in store for us, we are to discover it *together*. I feel that there will be more ownership and unity this way.

I am not always the greatest team player; I need to grow in this area. I was reminded of this on my summer break one night when we had our whole family over for dinner. My son, Chase, was trying to show me something on the computer, and I said, “How am I going to learn if you don’t let me do it myself.” And someone else said gently, “That’s what *you* do.”

A day or two later, in the reading for my class, I encountered this quote: “The churches that made comebacks were those that understood together what it would take.”⁸ And so I say, “Okay, Lord, we’re going to do this together from the get go. We’re going to discover what You have in store for us together.”

My friend, Troy Jensen, will want to know what my sermon plan is. Normally, within the first couple of weeks of my summer break, I have the entire year of sermons planned out and put on a tidy spreadsheet. That’s comfort for compulsive people like me. But I didn’t do that this summer. Strangely, this time it felt like that would have been *my* plan, *my* cistern, *my* horses. So, we’re going to pick up where we left off in the gospel of Matthew. Turns out that the sermons in Matthew we never got to will take us through November, which, oddly enough, is about the time I will have wrapped up my class work involving the evaluation of our church. Hmmm. Another coincidence? I don’t think so. I expect we’re going to be learning some things that will help me know how God wants us to finish out the preaching year when I need to know.

So, ► that’s pretty much what I did on my summer vacation.

In a moment, the Worship Team is going to come up and close us out with a song. I want you to listen for the bridge in the song that relates directly and beautifully to what I’ve been talking about. Pretty much everything I’ve said boils down to a simple question and a simple prayer. Remember ► the question: Are we using God or are we letting God to use us? Remember ► the prayer: “Lord, make me

⁷ Bob Waymire and C. Peter Wagner, *The Church Growth Survey Handbook*, 3d ed. rev. (Colorado Springs, CO: OC International, 1984), 11.

⁸ Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2007), 31.

aware of how You want to use me today.”

Now listen to ► the words we are about to sing to the Lord:

*Heal my heart and make it clean
Open up my eyes to the things unseen
Show me how to love like You have loved me
Break my heart for what breaks Yours
Everything I am for Your kingdom's cause*