

Big BUTS of the Bible
The “But” That’s Hard to
Believe
April 9, 2017

PRELUDE – From the Day

Worship Songs – From the Day / Trust in You
Announcements – Video

Feature – Every Good Thing / Offering

Good morning everyone.

First things first – on your way in you should have received a stone and, if you did not, you’re going to need one at the end of the service. So, if you did not get one, raise your hand and one of our ushers will make sure you have one.

Some of you have asked and the answer is no – these are not for throwing at the preacher in the event you don’t like what he is saying (which

could happen!)

I'm sure you realize that, quite often, the songs that we sing together as a congregation or that we hear from our band come straight from the Bible – as in, literally based on a verse or several verses of scripture.

The song we just heard is a good example.ⁱ It echoes a line from a letter that James brother of Jesus wrote all the way back in the first century; a letter which has been preserved for us in the New Testament. And I'm going to ask you to read this particular verse together with me *aloud* as it comes up on the screen.

Are you ready?

Here we go.

*Every good thing given
And every perfect gift is from
above,*

*Coming down from the Father
of lights,*

*With whom there is no
variation or shifting shadow.*

James 1:17

(NASB)

Every good thing you have in your life, everything you look at, everything you experience that makes you say, “wow, lucky me, I am so fortunate” – and you do say that from time to time, right? ...

Everything like that in your life, James says, comes as a gift from our Heavenly Father whose character is consistent and dependable and trustworthy. The graciousness and goodness of His heart towards us doesn't change from moment-to-moment. There's no shifting or variation with Him, James says.

Every good thing ... every perfect gift ... in your life and mine ... is from Him.

And that certainly is an encouraging thought; a thought worth rejoicing over and maybe even writing a peppy little song about.

But what about those things in our lives, the things we see and the things we experience, that *don't* make us feel lucky or fortunate? The things that *don't* make us feel like singing peppy songs or, more importantly, thanking and praising God for His graciousness and goodness towards us? What about the bad things that happen to us?

If you're a follower of Jesus and you've ever wondered that or if you're wondering that right now, *this message* – “The ‘But’ That’s Hard to Believe” – *is for you.*

Now, if you're here for the first time today, I realize that might sound a little odd. So, I should probably explain that what we're doing in this series is taking a look at some of those places in

the Bible where a very small word – “but” – makes a huge difference.

For example (and we talked about this in the first week of the series), Jesus once said that you and I, as His followers, can do what everyone else in the world does with their money and possessions. We can spend it all on ourselves and our inner circle in this life.

BUT, He said, there is another option which is far better: you and I can *give* some of our financial resources to the people and causes God loves – people like those who are less fortunate and causes like the church. By doing that you and I will literally – not symbolically, not spiritually, not figuratively but literally ... you and I will literally accumulate resources (“treasure” He called it) that will benefit us in the life to come, which is why I called that message “The ‘But’ That Lasts Forever.”

The Guest Experience

If you were here for that message, you know that I announced a tangible way to do that here at North Heartland which we're calling *The Guest Experience Project*.

From time-to-time we need to take care of some issues here in this wonderful facility that God has provided for us. And, right now, there are some things we need to do to make our facility more inviting and accessible for people who show up for the first time – our guests.

And just to be very clear, the reason we care about that is that a lot of those guests are coming because they're searching for God. Stuff is happening in their life and they're thinking "maybe that church up there off of Green Hills Road has some answers for me." And we do!

But when people walk in our doors for the first

time, they notice two things.

- First, they notice the facility, specifically the things that you and I *don't* notice anymore because we're used to the place. And that's what our little project is designed to address.

<chart> We're trying to raise \$44K by next Sunday to fix, improve or add useful functionality our building.

To this point, we've raised about \$18K which will take care of the first five of eight projects on our list and that's awesome.

But, there's still some work to do to get closer to that goal. We've had several individuals offer to handle all or part of the next two projects but, even if that happens, we'd still be about \$10K short and unable to do the eighth project. Plus, we're beginning to fall behind on our regular offerings for this year, so anything that puts us

over the goal can help out with that.

Bottom line, you can make it better for our guests and also store up eternal treasure for yourself by giving to this project. Stop by the Guest Experience table on the way out if you need help, or give to it through our website and our app. Next Sunday is the final day to give to the project.

Now, I said there were two things people notice whenever they walk through our doors for the first time, with the first being the facility. The second thing people notice – and I really debated whether or not to even bring this up because it isn't what I was planning to talk about this morning (and I promise I'll get back to that very soon) .. but every time I tried to put it out of my mind, I felt like the Lord was saying to me, "You can't talk about a project you are calling *The Guest Experience* without also talking about this second issue because it is just as important as the first (and maybe even more

so).”

The second thing people notice when they walk through our doors for the first time ... is *all of us*, collectively as a group. And what they're looking at (and let me be clear, I'm talking to everyone who says "I'm a Christian and NHCC is my church") is how friendly we are and how engaged we are.

In the past month, I've gotten two emails from families who came for the first time and said they were not coming back because no one spoke to them. They decided that we just aren't a friendly church; that we're not all that interested in welcoming newcomers.

Now, there's a dozen responses one could make to those conclusions such as:

- This experience is not intended to be relational. It can't be. We're not seated in a circle face-to-face.

- And if you really want to connect with people you have to get involved in a small group or a class or become a volunteer on a ministry team.

BUT ... BUT (and again, I'm talking to everyone who says "I'm a Christian and NHCC is my church") ... I just need to say that I wonder if there might be an element of truth in their feedback. And since that is a possibility, as your pastor, I also feel like I should point out that all of us bear some responsibility for the environment that's created here.

Specifically, *what you do between the parking lot and this room matters*. If you say "hi" to someone you don't know, that little step outside of your comfort zone (especially if you're an introvert) might make an eternal difference in someone's life. Somebody noticed they were here and tried to be friendly. And they'll come back.

In addition, *what you do in this room during the service matters*. It's not like when you go to a movie theater to take in the show. When we come to church (and again, I'm talking only to those who say "I'm a Christian and NHCC is my church"), we're not coming for a show.

We're not coming to see how well the band does or how well Rick (or whoever) does, though that obviously is important. We're not even coming just to worship and learn, though that is important, too. When we come to church, we are the Body of Christ gathered together and we represent Him in a way we might not be aware of.

The Apostle Paul was writing to the church at Corinth – which was a pretty messed up group of Christians (in other words, typical) – and he was talking about their worship services and how unbelievers who came to visit would react.

On the one hand, he said, if your gathering is

disorderly – if there’s chaos (specifically, in that case, everyone was coming and going and speaking in tongues at the same time) – they will think you are crazy.

On the other hand, he said, if there is order

...

... they will be convicted of sin and judged by what you say. As they listen, their secret thoughts will be exposed, and they will fall to their knees and worship God, declaring, “God is truly here among you.” 1 Corinthians 14:24-25 (NLT)

Now, we don’t speak in tongues as part of our services like they did, but the same principle applies. What we do and don’t do has an impact. It communicates something.

Specifically, if we show up on time (instead of habitually walking in 10 or 15 minutes late) ... or we stay through the final song (instead of

getting up and leaving early – and I know some of us are doing that because we’re volunteering between services so I’m not talking to you), we’re communicating something to the guests among us.

- We’re saying Jesus matters to us.
- We’re saying it’s important to gather together.

So, *The Guest Experience Project* (which we’re pretty convinced the Lord wants us to do) is about this facility and what it says to people but it’s also about us, collectively, as the gathered-together Body of Christ and what we communicate.

Ok, I think I said what the Lord wanted me to say about that, so if I just made you mad, talk to Him first. And then come talk to me if you need to. We’re all in this together.

Now, back to our regularly scheduled message
...

The Big BUT

So far in this series we've talked about "The 'But' That Lasts Forever" then "The 'But' That No One Wants (But Everyone Needs)" and then, last week, "The 'But' You Need to Lose" (which, in case you weren't here, was *not* about losing weight).

And if you missed any of those Sundays, I encourage you to watch, read or listen to the message via our app, website or podcast ... because those big "buts" could make a huge difference in your life.

But let's move on and talk about today's big "but": *The "But" That's Hard to Believe*. And to do so, we're going to have to go way back in history to a very familiar story that's recorded

in the first book of the Bible – the Book of Genesis.

Genesis chapter 37 tells us that a young man by the name of Joseph (the son of Jacob, not the husband of Mary) has a dream that he will eventually rule over his 11 brothers and even his father. But his brothers don't care for that idea so, one day, while they're all out hunting, they tie him up, throw him in a pit and then sell him to a band of slave traders who happen to be passing through.

They return home and tell their father Jacob that Joseph has been killed and eaten by a wild animal while the slave traders then take him to Egypt and sell him again, this time to a businessman named Potiphar.

One day as Joseph is working in Potiphar's house, Potiphar's wife tries to seduce him. He resists, she's embarrassed and offended, so she falsely accuses him of rape. And even though he

has managed Potiphar's business with integrity and excellence for several years, Joseph is immediately imprisoned.

While in prison, one of Joseph's cellmates (let's call him "Omar" – that's the number one name for Egyptian boys these days) ... Omar has a dream he doesn't understand. When he tells Joseph about it, Joseph interprets it. "It's good news, Omar. You will soon be released. And when you are, could you please mention my case to the king?"

Omar says yes, but when he's released, he *doesn't* say anything to the king – the Pharaoh. He forgets about Joseph.

So, for two more years, Joseph rots away in prison until one day the Pharaoh has a dream he doesn't understand. At that point, Omar (who happens to work for the king) remembers Joseph and tells the Pharaoh, who summons Joseph, who then interprets the dream.

“It’s a warning,” Joseph says, “that a widespread famine is going to strike the entire Middle East in seven years.”

Pharaoh believes that God is speaking through Joseph, so he releases him from prison and puts him second in command over all of Egypt with the responsibility to stockpile grain.

Seven years later, when the famine hits as predicted, word spreads throughout the region that, for some reason, there is grain available in Egypt. And guess who comes a-calling on Joseph, literally bowing down before him in fulfillment of the dream God had given him as a young boy?

His 11 brothers, the very ones who had abused and mistreated him; who had opened the door to so many bad circumstances in his life.

Of course, at this point, many years have passed

(maybe 20) and his brothers don't recognize him. So Joseph decides to take his time and get to know them before revealing his identity. In fact, if you read the whole story, he actually plays a bit of a cat and mouse game with them. It's kind of humorous.

But the day finally comes when he tells them straight out:

"I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!"

And that revelation causes them to be terrified for their very lives and rightfully so. Joseph is a position of power and influence and they are pretty much beggars at this point. They are at his mercy which, to their great surprise, is exactly what they receive from him!

Joseph says ...

"Do not be distressed and do

not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.

He continues:

“For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.”

And just in case they didn't get it, he says again:

“So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt.”

Three times he tells them, “you didn't send me here, God did.”

Then he says (and I love this part!)

“Now hurry back to my father and say to him, ‘This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don’t delay.”
Genesis 45:4-9 (NIV)

And that’s what they do.

Joseph’s brothers go get their dad, the clan moves to Egypt and re-settles there, and they all raise families who raise more families and so on and so forth until 400 years later when the People of Israel (which is Jacob’s God given name) would eventually be delivered from slavery by Moses– but that’s another story.

Here’s the kicker to *this* story ... and this brings us to the BUT that’s hard to believe (and it’s kind of been hinted at already in what Joseph has told his brothers).

When father Jacob finally dies several years after they've all moved to Egypt, the brothers start to worry that Joseph – out of respect for his father – has been hiding his anger and bitterness towards them. And now that Jacob is gone, Joseph will finally, at long last, settle the score.

And you really can't blame them for thinking that because, quite frankly, Joseph *does* have a lot over which he could be angry and bitter. In the 20 years between the time they threw him in the pit and the time when Pharaoh made him "lord over all of Egypt", Joseph had been the victim of:

- Jealousy
- abuse
- kidnapping
- human trafficking
- forced resettlement

- character assassination
- wrongful termination
- false accusation and false imprisonment
- forgotten promises and neglect

Not exactly a list that makes you say, “wow, lucky me, I am so fortunate.”

Not exactly a set of events that makes you want to sing a happy peppy song about “every good thing” ... because those things are *not* good. They *didn't* – and don't – come down as “good gifts from the Father of Lights.” They're *bad* things; *evil* things and it would be disingenuous to label them otherwise.

So, Joseph doesn't.

Instead, when he discovers that his brothers are worried ...

He says to them ...

“You intended to harm me ...

Some translations render that phrase as “you meant *evil* against me.”

In other words, “Brothers, the truth is that what you did to me and what happened to me in the years that followed looked bad, felt bad, was bad. And it still hurts to think about it sometimes. It was evil. It was intended to harm me.”

“BUT” (and this is the big BUT that’s hard to believe) ...

*“God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”
Genesis 50:20 (NIV)*

By the way, that word translated “intended” is very interesting. It comes from a Hebrew verb means “to weave.”

“You wove evil,” Joseph was saying, “but God *rewove* it together for good.”ⁱⁱ

From his vantage point on the timeline of human history, Joseph was able to look back and see that God had divinely redirected all the evil threads that were intended to bind him and destroy him. God used those threads so that he would be the right guy at the right place at the right time to stockpile the grain for Egypt and save his family.

What Joseph *couldn't* see that you and I *can* see is that God's “reweaving” went far beyond the people of Egypt and his brothers and their families. Joseph's story fit into a much larger plot involving multitudes of people and centuries of history, all leading up to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth and the saving of more lives and souls and eternities than he could ever imagine.

They intended it for evil ... *but* ... God intended

it for good.

Getting Personal

Of course, at this point the obvious question is “so what?” What does this mean for us?

I mean, it’s clearly good *for Joseph*. Lucky him, he even got to see at least a little bit of how the evil that had come his way had been redirected by God into something good. But what about us? What does it mean for us?

The answer is ... *it means the same exact thing* IF we belong to Christ.

If you have come to the place in your life where you have ...

- Agreed with God that you really are a sinner in need of a savior
- Believed that Jesus of Nazareth is that savior, that he died on a cross for your sins

and then rose to new life on the third day following

- Come to him and said “Jesus, be the boss of me. I want to learn from you. I want to be part of your movement in this world.”

If you are a Christian, then this big “but” applies to your life just like it did to Joseph’s.

Whatever it is might be intended to harm you, it might be intended for evil ... BUT ... God will eventually and in some way reweave that for your good and for his glory ...

... which is why the Apostle Paul writes that
...

*God causes all things [not just “the good things”] to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.
Romans 8:28 (NASB)*

<pic> Or, as author and pastor Max Lucado puts it: “In God’s hands, intended evil becomes eventual good.”

I like that a lot.

In fact, can we all say it aloud together? “In God’s hands, intended evil becomes eventual good.”

And that’s a wonderful thought and a wonderful truth but the reason I call this *the “but” that’s hard to believe* is because it often takes a very long time to *see* the good that God brings (and for some of us, we may never see it in this life), so we just have to trust that it’s true – just like the song we sang earlier, “when You don’t give the answers, I will trust, I will trust in you.”

And that can be a little frustrating, I know but let me say this. We’re not talking about blind faith. We’re not talking about putting our trust in a nice happy ending story from 3800 years ago or even in an encouraging Bible verse written 2,000 years ago.

Instead, our trust is based on what happened to Jesus of Nazareth whose betrayal, crucifixion and death – again, not exactly the kinds of things that make you say “wow, lucky me, I am so fortunate” – we remember this coming week.

In Him and through Him, God took what was intended for evil and transformed it for good – our good. God took all the evil hurled against His Son by rebellious humanity and the powers of darkness, and turned it into an instrument of reconciliation, atonement, and salvation for the world. And the result was and is the saving of many lives for all of eternity.

So, this big but isn't just a nice theological concept out there somewhere. It's something that God has already done ... through the cross ... and therefore will do for all who believe in Him.

And I'll say more about that next Sunday.

The Stone in Your Hand

But for now ... the “but” that’s hard to believe, especially when you’re in the middle of it ... especially when:

- When you’ve been rejected by your own family
- Or you’re trapped in the pit
- Or being carried off by human traffickers
- Or you’ve been falsely accused, wrongfully terminated and illegally imprisoned
- Or you’ve done something to help someone but they forget about you

... the “but” that’s hard to believe, especially when you’re in the middle of it, is that *intended evil will become eventual good*. “You intended it to harm me, BUT God intended it for good.”

And this morning, some of us are in the middle

of something in our lives that is intended for evil. We're not in Joseph's exact situation but something or someone is trying to harm us.

- Maybe it's a health crisis
- Maybe it's a financial setback
- Maybe it's a loss we've suffered – the death of a loved one, the ending of a relationship, the loss of a job
- Maybe it's an outright abuse or injustice
- Maybe it's just bad luck – wrong place at the wrong time – and now we're suffering.

Whatever it might be, we're in the middle of it and it's hard to see how God will ever bring anything good from it.

Others of us, on the other hand, are where Joseph eventually ended up. We're able to look back on something evil that happened to us and we can say along with him "it was intended to harm me and maybe even destroy me BUT, God

has used it for good in my life or in the life of someone else.”

And finally, some of us aren't in either of those positions. We're one of those fortunate few for whom things have always been good, at least in comparison to others. When we hear those happy peppy songs about “every good thing coming down from the Father of Lights” it's easy for us to rejoice because that's our life experience.

However, we know and care about others for whom that is *not* their experience. And we're watching them struggle with an evil that is currently present or struggling to reconcile an evil that's past and our heart just goes out to them. We want them to trust that God will, in time, weave that into some kind of good into their life.

So, here's what I'm going to invite you to do. Depending whichever situation you're in, that little stone you received earlier can represent all three of those experiences.

It can represent the burden of past or present evil that currently weighs you down.

That burden is heavy like a millstone tied around your neck that you drag with you everywhere you go. It's like the giant boulder they rolled in front of Jesus' tomb that left His disciples wondering: *how can anything good ever come from this?*

And what I would like for you to do in just a few minutes is to use the marker in the seat back in front of you to write on your stone whatever that evil is or was. And there may be more than one.

The little stone you have can also serve as a memorial of the good that God eventually brought from the intended evil, if you've

been fortunate enough to experience that in your life.

One of the songs we sing together from time to time is “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” – sort of a King James Version of the “Every Good Thing” song from earlier.

There’s a line in it that’s a little strange if you don’t know what it means. It goes like this: “Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by Thy help I’ve come” which is a reference to a worship practice of the ancient Hebrews.

Whenever God intervened for them in some miraculous way, they would often set up a stone called an “Ebenezer” to mark the location. They called it that because “eben” means stone and “ezer” means help. So, an Ebenezer is a stone that serves as a reminder of God’s help.ⁱⁱⁱ

And the stone in your hand can be *your* Ebenezer – a memorial of the good that God

eventually brought about from an intended evil.

And what I invite you to do in just a minute is to use the marker in the seat back in front of you to write on your stone whatever that good is. And you might write more than one thing.

Finally, that little stone you have can also represent the burden you feel for someone else ...

... who needs to have faith that God has the power to turn the intended evil they're experiencing or have experienced into eventual good. And you can use the marker to write on your stone their name or initials or something that represents whatever evil they're suffering through right now.

Now, what's going to happen next is that I'm going to stop talking and you're going to start writing (if you wish, of course).

And then when you've written on your stone

whatever it is you need to write, I want you to come down front and put your stone in one of the buckets as a way of casting your burdens or someone else's burdens on the Lord in *faith* that His promise *will* be true, or of raising up an Ebenezer of thanks to the Lord that you've already seen that it's true.

And then, if you wouldn't mind, go back and have a seat until we're all finished. Then I'll have one more thing to say and we'll be done.

Lord, we give you this time and ask that your Holy Spirit speak to us what we need to hear and lead us to do what we need to do.

We pray in the name of Jesus and for the sake of His Kingdom, Amen.

Feature – Noodling/Thy Will

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Tenebrae Service this Wednesday from 7-8pm.

“Tenebrae” is a Latin word meaning “shadows” so the idea is to use music, scripture, communion and art to recreate the spiritual and emotional aspects of Jesus carrying our sins to the cross. As the service progresses, the room and the mood grows darker and more somber to draw us into the memory of His betrayal, abandonment and suffering.

Honestly, it’s not the most pleasant service we do at NHCC, but sin - and the price Jesus paid for our forgiveness - isn’t pleasant either. That’s why, as Christians, it is good and healthy for us to take time to personally reflect on that price before we celebrate the victory of resurrection on Easter Sunday. In fact, every time we do this service, we hear people saying that it is one the most moving

services they ever attend. So, my invitation and challenge to you (again, if you're a Christian) is to make this night part of your Holy Week schedule.

To make it easier for those with children (and this service is probably not the most child-friendly), childcare for children up to 5th grade is provided free of charge. If possible, please reserve a spot in advance by e-mailing Nichole@northheartland.org.

In addition to the Tenebrae Service, we'll also have the building open from on from 6-8:30 pm Thursday and 9:00-noon Friday for anyone who wishes to pray and reflect on the art display that commemorates Jesus' walk to the cross.

Endnotes

i I'm referring to the song *Every Good Thing* by The Afters which was performed just before this message.

<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/afters/everygoodthing.html>

ii From Max Lucado quoted @ <http://www.faithgateway.com/what-was-meant-for-evil-god-uses-for-good/#.W0mVcNLytnI>

iii 1 Samuel 7:12