

To Light Up My Backyard

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God calls each of us to a backyard.

I love my backyard.

Our backyard is surrounded by trees, so for most of the day, the backyard is shaded. I love being in the cool shade. I love listening to the birds in the trees. I love that the chipmunks in our backyard bark at me like they own the place and like I'm disturbing them. We have a firepit, and I enjoy building fires, sitting there while the wood burns, listening to jazz, and praying. My backyard is one of my happy places.

A backyard is the place you are responsible for.

Tammi and I planted the plants we wanted out there. When the helicopter seeds fall from the maple trees in the spring, I have to clean them out of the gutters. I have to cut the grass and rake the leaves when they fall or pay someone to do it. A physical backyard becomes a great metaphor for something much more significant. Our backyard is the place where we belong, and it's our responsibility.

God has called Valley to a backyard.

Our backyard is vast. It's Hartford and Litchfield Counties. These two counties are not only where we belong. They are our responsibility. One million people live here who don't have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and God has called us to share the Gospel with them. We want to light up this great big backyard with the Gospel. That's our church's calling.

God has called YOU to a backyard.

There are some callings that we all share. For instance, God has called all human beings to Himself; He loves us and wants to be in a relationship with us through Jesus Christ. God has called everyone who comes to Jesus to be a disciple and to multiply disciples. But WHERE does God want us to be disciples who make disciples? That's where our calling begins to get unique. Our own spiritual backyard is the answer to that question. God has called Valley to a backyard. God has called me to a backyard. God has called you to a backyard. But that should raise a critical question for you:

Where is YOUR backyard?

In Jeremiah 29, God told a group of people to settle down in Babylon.

Prophets had been telling the people for centuries that judgment was coming if they didn't turn from their wicked ways, but they ignored God's voice. Then the Babylonian Empire invaded Judah and carried away 10,000 exiles to Babylon. When they reached Babylon, some held out hope that they would go home quickly. God dispelled those hopes and told them to prepare for a long time in exile. His command in **Jeremiah 29:5-6** is powerful,

"Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease."

God is telling His people to build lives for themselves. It was their new home.

Then God told the exiles to seek the shalom of Babylon.

Shalom is a powerful word. It means "peace", but it means much more than just the absence of conflict. It means that all is well; all is well between me and God, so all tends to be well around me. Shalom can be translated as "**welfare**" but that's still a bit thin. Let me re-translate **Jeremiah 29:7**. God said,

"But seek the [*shalom*] of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its [*shalom*] you will find your [*shalom*]."

God was telling His people to seek the *shalom* of their captors. Pray for the *shalom* of Babylon. How could they? Because it was the only way for them to enjoy *shalom* since Babylon was their home.

You are an exile, too, if you are a disciple of Jesus.

You are a citizen of the Kingdom of God. That's where your loyalty is. That's where your beliefs, values, and way of living come from. But you are living in the kingdoms of this world. You are surrounded by people who believe in different gods or in no god; they think that money is the point of work; and they look forward to Easter for chocolate bunnies, tulips, and family meals. You are a fish out of water. You are living in a foreign land. You are an exile, but God has placed you here, and He is telling you to make it home. For now.

There is a direct line from Babylon to your backyard.

Babylon is just another place, just another city. God is saying to His people, "When you find yourself in a foreign place—in a foreign city—put down roots. Pray for its *shalom*. Work for its *shalom*. Make it home. Make it your place. Make it the place you are responsible for. Make it your backyard. Which means that this word from God to the exiles is a word to us. You may not know it, you may deny it, you may rent a home or live in an apartment, but you have a backyard! You have a place where God has put you, and you are responsible for it.

What does your backyard look like?

Backyards take many shapes. Your backyard may be your neighborhood. It could be an apartment building, a cul-de-sac, or a street where you know everyone. Sometimes your backyard will be tied to relationships. It could be your extended family—your siblings, your cousins, and their kids. It could be the people from your book club, other cancer survivors like you, or the families in your kid's basketball team. Sometimes your backyard is tied to work. It could be the other people in your office, other pilots in your airline, people who work with you at ESPN, or veterans. You have to figure out what your backyard looks like. But you have one.

God made you to SHINE.

Proverbs 11:10-11 says that the righteous make any city (or backyard) better.

Proverbs 11:10 says,

When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices, and when the wicked perish there are shouts of gladness.

When there are righteous people in a city and when they prosper and grow, everyone is glad because everyone benefits. The second part of the verse is darker; when the wicked are gone, then everyone is also glad because everyone also benefits. Why? **Proverbs 11:11** tells us,

By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is overthrown. A wicked person makes life worse for everyone—right down to their words. We’ve all known that wicked person who is constantly stirring up trouble and that they make life worse. But a righteous person makes life better for everyone. If you are a disciple of Jesus, then you’re seeing who you are created and called to be. You are created and called to make the world a better, godlier place for everyone. What does that look like?

I think about the way that the Underground has made Connecticut better.

The Underground is a ministry that combats human trafficking. Human trafficking is a scourge on our society, and the Underground helps victims break free from their traffickers and find a new life. They provide an exit plan and help victims find safe places to hide and new lives. That means providing healthcare, housing, training for a new job, and a new community. The Underground was started at Wintonbury Church by Christians, and it’s guided by Jesus’ mission to bring good news to the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim liberty to the captives and the Lord’s favor on His people.¹ Human trafficking is going on in our backyard, but the righteous bless their backyards.

God is the King whose Kingdom is coming and who sends us.

Psalm 47:2 proclaims that which the Bible affirms from beginning to end, that God is the true King of Heaven and earth,

For the LORD, the Most High, is to be feared, a great king over all the earth.

In **Mark 1:15**, Jesus announced that God’s Kingdom had dawned and called people into it,

... “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Until then, Jesus sends us out to represent Him just as He did His apostles in **Matthew 10:7-8**,

“And proclaim as you go, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. ...”

Those apostles represented God. Like the righteous ones in the Proverbs, they were to make the world a better place by the power of God at work in them and through them. As they went, they were to announce God’s rule and call people to repent, to leave behind wickedness, to leave behind the kingdoms of this world, and to come to the Kingdom of God. And that’s exactly what we do now!

That means we are His ambassadors.

Paul plainly tells us that we are ambassadors. In **2 Corinthians 5:20** he writes,

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. ...

That means we represent the Kingdom of God, our true home, to the kingdoms of this world. We represent God to our city. We are the Light of Christ shining in our backyards!

¹ <https://theundergroundne.org/about/>

We don't just do good deeds; we share Good News and invite people to join us in God's Kingdom.

Like Jesus and the apostles before us, we announce that Jesus is King and that the Kingdom of God has come in Him. And we invite people to join us in the Kingdom of God. We invite people to put their faith in Jesus. In Jesus and in Him alone there is freedom from sin, a relationship with God, and new life now. We invite people to put their hope in King Jesus, Who will certainly return, and in the eternal life that He brings to His people. That's light! We shine brightly in whatever backyard God has put us in.

God put you in a UNIQUE backyard.

God put Frank Higgins in a truly unique backyard.

Frank lived in the late 1800s and early 1900s. His call into ministry led him near Duluth, Minnesota, on the edge of the great north woods. Logging was huge in those days. The woods were filled with lumberjacks cutting down giant trees, sending them down river to feed the nation's construction boom. The lumberjacks' life was hard. They were paid very little, they worked long hours, and they partied hard when they got paid and came to town, so they were looked down on by most people. Frank Higgins began to get to know the lumberjacks. He was a burly, big-voiced man himself, and he fit in with them. Frank came to realize that there were 30,000 lumberjacks out in the north woods with no one to tell them about Jesus, no one who really cared for them. One day, a lumberjack with pneumonia ended up in the hospital in Duluth. He called for Frank Higgins, and Frank went to pray with him. That lumberjack accepted Jesus on the spot. Before he died, he told Frank that if it hadn't been for him, that lumberjack would have died without Jesus. He asked Frank to promise to go and tell the other lumberjacks about Jesus. So, the vast north woods became Frank Higgins' backyard.²

Your backyard may be far, far away.

God may be calling you out of your familiar life right now to a very foreign place. He may be calling you to become a missionary to the people of another country and a very different culture. And God may be calling you away from the work you're doing now to serve Him full-time. God called me to become a pastor. That calling took me from Florida to South Carolina to Minnesota and now to Connecticut. God may be calling you to a very different backyard.

Your backyard may be the places where you live, work, and play already.

You don't have to cross the globe to find your backyard. Sometimes you just have to open your eyes, open your heart, cross the street, and connect with people. God may have put you in the middle of your backyard already.

God made clear to the exiles that they were in a backyard by His power and choice.

Landing in Babylon raised awful questions for the exiles to answer. Judah had been defeated. Had God abandoned them? Had He been defeated? Were the Babylonian gods more powerful than the God of Israel? Who puts us in our backyard? The answer is right there in **Jeremiah 29:4**,

"Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon ..."

² Harry Rimmer, *The Last of the Giants* (Aneko Press, 2015 edition) pp. 21-27.

God opened by declaring His name, “the LORD of hosts.” That name means that He has all the power He needs...” Then God reminded them, “I am the God of Israel.” That means that God is with His people and for them, whether they see it and accept it or not. Then God declared that He had sent them into exile. It’s all part of God’s bigger plan. God put the exiles in Babylon. He put them in their new backyard.

God trusts us with our backyard.

If God put the exiles in their new backyard, God certainly puts us in our backyards. And He does it for a reason. He has something He wants to do in and through us. For some reason, He thinks that this is the right place for us to be. Your backyard is yours and yours alone. God has given it to you. And He trusts you with it.

Light up YOUR backyard.

Have you neglected your backyard?

Are there weeds growing there? Is the grass thigh-high? Your honest answer may be, “Yes”. And you may be saying, “I don’t want to hear this” because you feel guilty, but guilt isn’t the point. The job may seem overwhelming, and you may be shut down as a result, but getting overwhelmed isn’t the point either. If you have neglected the backyard God has given you, you may need to repent, ask God for forgiveness, and ask God for help getting started.

The BLESS Lifestyle is the simplest, most approachable way we can light up our backyards.

BLESS is an acronym that stands for five simple steps that can help you light up your backyard. “B” stands for “Begin with Prayer”. You can pray for lost people and the people around you. That’s where life change always begins. “L” stands for “Listen with Care”. We listen to other people as they describe their lives and ask questions. “E” stands for “Eat Together”. Hospitality opens doors. The first “S” stands for “Serve People”. When we serve people, we build relationships. The second “S” stands for “Share Your Story”. People want to know who we are and where we come from. If you want to know more, stop by Connect Point today after worship or go to Valley’s homepage. There are all kinds of BLESS resources there.

Denley and Ann Caughman have been lighting up their backyard, and it shows.

Denley has been my friend and mentor for the past 25 years. Their backyard has changed a lot in these decades. At this point in life, their backyard has a lot to do with their extended family—children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and cousins. When Denley’s parents died, he and Ann started hosting their annual family reunion. Denley and Ann have been working to connect the family and share Jesus with family members. I think of Denley’s cousin who is in his 80s and was distant from the family for years; he came to a family funeral, expressed a need for family, and came to faith in Jesus after meeting with Denley. Last weekend was their 50th family reunion; it was the largest ever. That’s what it’s like for one couple to light up their backyard.

Let’s say a joyful “yes” to God’s calling.

You are a light called to shine in a God-given backyard somewhere. In your backyard, God calls you to love Him deeply, to be disciples, and to make disciples. He calls you to build for the Kingdom of God and to bring Him much glory. Let’s say “yes” to those backyards and to God who has given them to us.