

The sweet care of God

As many of you may already know, my family (my parents and youngest sister, Alexa) arrived in Italy at the end of May and after my parents left on June 10, Alexa stayed on to serve and be a part of my life and the church body here for another week. She left this past Wednesday and it was difficult to see her go.

I thank God that it was a very rich visit with my family. I learned many good lessons and was challenged in a number of ways during their visit. We traveled most of the time that my parents were here. Then the week that Alexa stayed with me, she and I spent time with each of the church families serving them and enjoying fellowship together. Both schedules were intense though different, but there was still plenty of time to enjoy one another. One of our “practices”, during and after our travels as a family, was to encourage each other to acknowledge the many graces and mercies of God during our trip. I would like to continue to grow in this habit of having my eyes open to see and then thank God for His abounding grace each day. We had nearly two pages worth of God's graces from our travels and never did finish. I want to thank God personally for answered prayer. My desire was that this time would be spiritually stimulating for my family and I believe that it was. They had the opportunity to spend some time with our church body and though the language barrier was a bit frustrating at times, they still had the chance to get to know the hearts of several of the believers in the church. The believers welcomed them so warmly and it was a great blessing for me to be able to share my blood family with my church family.

God taught me a lot during this time regarding patience and also showed me a lot about what it means to truly love others. Patience because I was the “expert” who spoke Italian and knew the culture on this trip and at times that was tiring. It meant fielding lots of questions, organizing many details, translating, and simply being available. How good it was to gain fresh perspective on what it means to be a leader! What a reminder to pray for our pastors and elders more being as this is their daily role.

Furthermore, I thought of the verse in Philippians 2:4 several times during our travels. Especially when I was more concerned about my own interests. The verse reads *“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others”*. What does it mean to truly love one another? It doesn't mean that I don't have any preferences. I certainly know my preferred gelato flavor(s) and didn't hesitate in choosing those flavors each time my family paused for a treat;-) However, bottom line, did it mean that I would be more concerned about following my agenda rather than deferring to the interests of others? Would I be more concerned about wanting to relax rather than taking a walk with my mom? Or carrying only my stuff rather than helping my family? Or wanting to see and experience everything rather than taking time to sit and talk with a member of my family? As is always the case, when walking in obedience to God's Word, rather than being a disappointment, as our flesh might tell us, it is always a great joy to defer to the interests of others. I learned and saw that it changes attitudes and atmospheres drastically when we put aside our expectations and interests in a desire to glorify God and be the light of Christ. I pray that I continue to grow in an awareness of how to better love those around me.

Another lesson which God taught me was that of the importance of meditating upon Christ. Sadly, it's too easy when sightseeing or traveling or simply when busy with daily life and “getting things done” to not just sit and marvel at the wonders of salvation in Christ and the character of God. Of course being surrounded by God's creation was a clear reminder everyday of His power and intelligence and goodness and of our insignificance (praise God for the clear evidences of Him in everything), however, it does take conscious effort to train our mind to think about whatever is true, honorable, just, lovely,

commendable, etc. (Phil. 4:8). Despite a busy schedule, God was gracious to give strength and joy during the trip. We had time in His Word as a family and I was able to spend concentrated time in the Word each day which I know made a huge impact on my overall outlook and attitude during our travels. I even had some opportunities to share with several people about Christ during our trip. What a privilege and what a good reminder that we are never “off duty” or on vacation from Christ. Praise God He doesn't take a vacation from us either!

Regarding evangelization and sharing Christ with others, we had an evangelistic picnic one Sunday while my family was here. There were a few people who came. Praise God! Martino and Evelina and their four children came. This is the Polish family whom I've mentioned before. They listened attentively to the evangelistic message where Marco clearly pointed out our sin, God's judgment and our need for a Savior. However, they are very attached to their religion and feel that they are okay. They continue to see a difference in how we live and felt very much welcomed and at home among our church family. We pray that they would recognize their need for Jesus Christ, and not just religion. In addition, , one of Martina's closest friends, Prisca, came. When Marco gave her a Bible with a few suggestions on how to start studying it and what to read, she made the comment that she'd been wanting a Bible of her own for a while. She seems willing to come back and hear more.

This past Sunday I was able to take my sister Alexa with me to evangelize in Adria. Dori told me recently that her work schedule has been changed and that now she will need to work every Sunday afternoon. This may seem upsetting from a human perspective, however, this too is clearly in God's hands. Yes, Dori and I are both a bit disappointed but we are encouraging each other to rest in God's ways and His timing. We never know how the Lord might use this.

How wonderful it was that God provided my own sister to go out with me this past Sunday! It was her first time street evangelizing and though she couldn't understand what was being shared and said, she did observe the faces of the people with whom I talked and made comments like “Giulia seemed more interested than Carlotta. Sara was happy to talk with you. Alessandra on the other hand . . . By the way, how do you start conversations with these people?” We were able to talk in depth with two groups of girls who all listened and took tracts afterward, Giulia and Carlotta (approximately 15 years old) and then Alessandra and Sara (maybe 18 and 19) if you would like to pray for them by name. However, apart from good conversations with these gals, one of the most precious parts of the afternoon was being able to share that time with my sister and share details with her from the conversations which brought up questions and comments. It was also a chance for her to see another aspect of Christianity through evangelization and also the lost state of humanity.

We also saw Iulia while we were out. Remember Sara and Iulia? Recently Sara has been going through some big changes in her life which she has not shared about in detail but which seem to be the reason that she has contacted Dori with interest in studying the Bible. We give thanks to God for this recent development! Dori is planning to meet with Sara this week to begin a series of Bible studies on the book of Genesis with her. So, when I saw Iulia and mentioned Sara and Dori, Iulia quickly apologized for the fact that she hadn't responded to any of our messages. “That was an incredibly busy time for me with school and end of the year exams,” she explained. “However, now I'm on summer vacation and am much more available.” I mentioned to her that I would be leaving within a week but asked if I could contact her about getting together for a Bible study before I left. She didn't hesitate when she said “yes”. What a lesson to me in the importance of persevering!

The graces and mercies of God are inexhaustible. Recently, I was struck once again by a simple but profound truth shared in one of Marco's sermons: when we consider the glory of God, it is incredible

that He would have thoughts for us men, and what's more, that He would have a heart for us, care physically for us, and care spiritually and eternally for all those who humble themselves and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

“O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouth of babes and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” (Ps 8:1-4)

Cared for by our glorious God,
Ashley