

The Privilege of Struggle and Suffering 2020
 Hebrews 12:1-4, 12-15 Philippians 1:21-30

Hebrews 12:1-4, 12-15 (New Revised Standard Version)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled.

Philippians 1:21-30 (New Revised Standard Version)

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

I suppose you have noticed by now that **life can be difficult**
 and that things don't always work out the way we were expecting.

Back in March,
 who would have thought we'd still be grappling with Covid-19?

In various ways we've each tried to cope, make the best of it.
 We've had to deal with many unexpected challenges and changes,
 and still we're facing a fairly uncertain tomorrow...
...the future, who knows for sure, when or what normal will be like?

I was complaining to someone recently about how weary I am
 with this whole Covid-thing, the adjustments we've had to make,
 & griping, how long are we going to have to put up with all this?

Later that day I got an email from one of those ancestry websites.
 It was about one of my ancestor-relatives, who at six years old
 left MO to come out West with her family in a covered wagon.

Along the way the rest of her family were all killed, and yet,
 somehow she endured and persevered with courage and strength
 and made a good, productive and meaningful life for herself...

... and looking at her photograph, a strong and determined woman,
 I was a bit embarrassed that I had just been complaining

about such comparatively minor and petty discomforts.

I got this image of her shaking her head and rolling her eyes
with disappoint at how little it takes to disrupt and disturb me,
inconveniences & irritants that she wouldn't have even noticed.

The Christian community being addressed in the book of Hebrews,
was having a rough time, it was the beginnings of persecution,
though not yet violent or shedding of anyone's blood.

Yet it was not easy to stay with it, to endure and remain faithful,
and Christians needed each other's support & strength to get by.
The author's intent was to encourage them to focus on Jesus Christ,
and be strong, courageous and unified holding fast to their faith.

Chapter 11 is an inspiring list of Old Testament faithful heroes,
who believed and trusted God's promises, obeyed God's commands,
and who **ran their race of faith well**, with integrity and care,
even while enduring difficulties, struggles and suffering.

In the next chapter, the "Therefore" and what follows in our text
was to encourage those Christians to remember those who endured
"that great cloud of witnesses", and to follow their example.

Then, yes, it can be difficult, unpleasant and even overwhelming,
but consider the suffering Jesus endured for your sake ... vs. 12-15
Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for
your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with everyone, and
the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no
root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble.

And how are they supposed to accomplish all that? vs. 1-2
let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our
faith.

The point, is to focus on Jesus Christ, his life and mission:
the pioneer - the originator and author who goes before us,
much like the cloud by day and fire by night of the Exodus.
So look to Jesus
to lead us through the wilderness into the Promised Land.

the perfecter of our faith - the one who completes & will finish,
whose plan & purpose is for our benefit & spiritual growth...
...therefore our situation is part of the work God is accomplishing.
The call is to trust and have confidence in God's will and purpose,
placing that above our own... even if it means struggle & suffering...

... meaning that for us, Christ-like discipleship is to place
God's will and purpose, ahead of our own wants and desires,
and for our relationship with the Lord to matter more to us
than any of the glittery & enticing stuff of this world,

and accept that to be faithful may come with a cost.

e.g. Wesley Britt was such a great offensive lineman in college,
that he was selected for the Playboy Mag. All-American team.

But as a deeply committed Christian

he didn't want his name to be associated with that magazine,
so despite the ridicule of others, he declined that honor.

He stood up to critics in the media, because as he explained it,

**it would be inconsistent with who he was and wanted to be,
with who he believes God created and called him to become,
because above all, he wants his life to please the Lord.**

No matter what, his priority was a faithful response to God's call.

That is also the message and truth of the Philippians passage.

Philippians is one of the most joyful letters Paul wrote,
and you can't miss the love he felt for that congregation.

The remarkable thing is that he wrote it from a Roman prison,
during the intense and brutal persecution of Christians by Nero.

Writing from his dungeon cell, Paul explains that it's all good.

Live to serve God or die and be with Christ – I can't lose,
for to look at death, he saw a new life, eternal live.

Despite his dire circumstances and suffering,

Paul can't get past God's steadfast gracious love and mercy
which changes & redefines the way he saw everything else.

Paul's chief concern was not the discomfort of his imprisonment
nor the likelihood of torture and even his execution.

The Apostle had a longer – larger, more eternal perspective,
that could see past his present situation in life,

so for him, dying meant **the joy of being with Jesus Christ.**

**Above all he wanted his life to count for the Kingdom of God,
so everything he was, everything he did was about Christ,
and his focus was on how Jesus might be exalted,
specifically by Paul speaking boldly at his trial ...**

... and so he writes vs. 21 For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.

Paul's perspective is to trust God entirely and completely,

and he's OK with faithfulness to God that **costs something**,
because he is sure that whatever the outcome,
God always has something far better in mind...

**... therefore it's not what I decide, want and desire,
but whatever best serves the will and purpose of the Lord.**

So Paul was able to write, vs. 21-23,27

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Paul is urging his dear friends in Philippi,
to live worthy of the blessings of grace in unity --

- with God-given strength and courage, hope and perseverance,
for whatever the situation or outcome, even struggle or suffering
it is all part of **God's gift of grace** for our growth and benefit.

Do you recall the movie, "Saving Private Ryan", set during WW II?

A family had four sons all serving in the military.

Three of the sons had been killed on the battlefield,
and the fourth was serving in a front-line unit in France.

The Army didn't want his family to lose all four of their sons,
and so a special team of soldiers was sent out
to find and retrieve that last son away from the fighting -

-- and along the way, trying to locate and bring him back,
a number of the would-be rescue-soldiers are killed.

In fact, by the end, the entire team has been wiped out,
but they do find and save this Private Ryan.

And as the last soldier of this special rescue team is dying,
he says to young Private Ryan, "Earn this"...

* **... live your life worthy of the sacrifice we've made for you.**

That is precisely what Paul is urging the Philippian Christians.

vs. 27 Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

So how do we live this out in our world and context?

Worthy of the Gospel and sacrifice of Jesus Christ?,
a life that reveals the love and compassion of the Lord,
a life through which the grace and healing of God can flow.

So perhaps instead of seeing our situation as a hopeless challenge,
or feeling overwhelmed & defeated by our struggles & sufferings,
perhaps it's an amazing and wonderful opportunity for growth,
to gain something, a blessing we might not otherwise receive.

~ to draw nearer to the Lord, to grow deeper and more giving,
and for **redemptive transformation** to take place in us.

~ to serve our Lord in creative and meaningful new ways
that help meet real needs around us, needs beyond our own,
to make better use of God's gifts entrusted to our care.

~ and to make a real, a meaningful and positive difference

in our community for the glory, purpose & pleasure of God.

The point is,

God considers us worthy and capable for such a time as this,
having created and equipped each of us to serve his purpose,
with significant lives, faithful, useful and effective,
to prevail as did those **faithful ones who preceded us.**

We are invited to be a part of healing and transforming this world,
by living a life defined by God's grace, purpose and intention,
by serving God in all the opportunities of life we encounter.

So, as we follow, as God's grace permeates and saturates our lives,
even though we don't know exactly where or how God is leading us,
we help each other trust in God's grace, power and promises,
as together we seek to discover the will & workings of God.

God does have a purpose and plan, including helping each of us
to discover and use our lives, our gifts and blessings well,
and to become the faithful disciples **we were created to be...**

... and one of the ways God does that, can be through circumstances,
through the struggles, challenges & opportunities we encounter.

We are, each one of us, exactly when, where & what God wants for us,
and intends for us, as his own precious, blessed & beloved ones,
to live meaningful and useful lives that serve to accomplish
good that will last far beyond the limits of our mortal life.

I believe that God is up to something new here at 1st Presbyterian,
and I don't want anybody to miss out on
any of the fun and excitement God intends for us!

None of us knows when or what conditions will be life after Covid,
but there will be wonderful ways and **opportunities to rebuild,**
for all of us to serve the Lord well, joyfully & usefully,
for our faith to grow while making a real difference.

As I was thinking about the point and message of these passages,
and what they might mean for us and how to explain them today,
I was reminded of studying the humble rhinoceros in college,
a large and somewhat clumsy creature that doesn't see very well.

Rhinos have terrible vision, and can only see about 30 feet ahead,
and yet the speed of a charging rhinoceros is about 30 mph.

And isn't it exceptionally bold and remarkable to run at 30 mph
when you can't even see what's out there past 30 feet ahead?
I believe we can learn something about
faith and discipleship from the humble rhinoceros.

These are challenging , confusing and changing times we live in.

The future is uncertain and none of knows all that lies ahead.
But like it or not, this is our world, our culture and circumstance,
and God has placed us here **intentionally**, called us & equipped us
to serve according to his will & purpose **for such a time as this**.

And I don't read anywhere in Scripture where the Lord ever commands
the people of God to hunker down in fear & disengage from the world.

But rather, God calls us to trust & obey, to **discipleship**,
to be a bold, open and faithful community on a mission.

**So having received grace, living that grace is my life's purpose,
and I've decided that I want to and will try to follow Jesus
with the boldness, strength and courage of a rhinoceros...**

... because I believe and trust the one who said to Joshua vs. 5-6, 9

As I was with Moses, **so I will be with you**; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous; for
you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them.

I hereby command you: **Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God
is with you wherever you go.**"