

Man of Sorrows: Survival Gear

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Reverend Peter Jonker

Philippians 4:4-9

Maybe you think this is an odd text for a sermon series on suffering. It's one of the most cheerful texts in the Bible. It's a bright, sunshiny text. "Rejoice! Rejoice! Don't be anxious about anything! Think about excellent praiseworthy and admirable things and the God of peace will be with you!" Great words, but probably not the words a pastor would choose to read to a person in distress. If your life is coming apart, if your heart is heavy with grief because you lost someone, if you are having trouble sleeping at night because of your worries, you don't want some smiling, tanned preacher waltzing into your pain and saying: "Hey now! Don't be anxious! Rejoice! Think about excellent and praiseworthy things!!" It reminds me of Proverbs 25:20 – "Like vinegar poured on a wound is one who sings songs to a heavy heart." That's Biblical wisdom. I certainly don't want my sermon today to be like vinegar on anyone's open wounds...and, heaven knows, there are a lot of open wounds here this morning.

Perhaps it would help to know that the man who wrote these words had a few open wounds of his own. The man who wrote these words was familiar with suffering. The apostle Paul had known his share of sleepless nights and fearful days. For example, where is Paul when he writes these cheerful words? Where is Paul when he writes the book of Philippians? He's in prison. He clearly refers to his imprisonment in chapter 1 – he talks about being in chains for Christ. These cheerful words are not written by some tanned megachurch preacher from the comfort of his study; these words are written by a man in chains.

And this imprisonment is only a small part of the troubles Paul has seen. Multiple times in his letters, Paul offers a catalogue of his trials. Tim Keller lists six different occasions. Perhaps the most vivid of those catalogues is in 2 Corinthians 11 "I have been flogged ... severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received ... forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits...in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers ... I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked." At the beginning of 2 Corinthians, Paul talks about being under pressure far beyond his ability to endure; pressure so intense that he despaired of life itself. He despaired to the point where he wasn't sure he wanted to be alive anymore. So when Paul writes these words, be assured: they are not trite, they are not glib; Paul has walked up to the edge of despair and looked over the edge

When you see that these are the words of a fellow sufferer it helps you to hear them differently. Paul's not telling you to cheer up; Paul is giving you words that will help you survive. Based on his hard experience, he's offering you survival gear that will help you make this journey through pain and uncertainty. Philippians 4 offers survival gear, survival tips, for those who are in the valley, and maybe even more important, survival tips for those who will someday have to walk the journey through the valley of pain and loss, which is absolutely all of us. In fact, that's how I want to frame these words of Paul. We are all on our journey of life and faith, and on that journey we know there will be steep and narrow passages, we know there will be mountains to climb and dark confusing forests to navigate. In Philippians 4 Paul is preparing us for those times. This is Paul's survival guide and he has three survival tips for us.

First Paul tells us to stay hydrated. When you're a pilgrim hiking through the barren land of suffering, you need to stay hydrated. Verse 6 tells us how to stay hydrated: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." Prayer is hydration. Prayer is water. When we pray we open our hearts, we open our souls and God waters us. In the words of Tish Harrison Warren, "to pray in the midst of our chaos and pain is to reach for a reality that is more enduring than what we feel at the present moment." When we pray in the wilderness, we drink from God's deep springs.

Tish Warren says that in her book *Prayer in the Night*, and for her it's not just an abstract claim; it's something that comes out of her experience praying in an emergency room covered with blood. When she was

in her late 30's she found herself miscarrying the son she'd been expecting. It wasn't supposed to be this traumatic. When the miscarriage started, doctors said it would be a slow and relatively simple process. Instead she found herself losing dangerous amounts of blood. Her husband rushed her to the hospital, blowing through red lights. They rushed her up to surgery, nurses were all around her, getting her ready but in the middle of all that she cried out, "No wait, Compline! I need to pray Compline!" Compline a prayer prayed every evening before bed by many people in more liturgical traditions. The startled nurses stepped back and there, covered in blood, in the middle the chaos she prayed, "Keep us as the apple of your eye. Hide us under the shadow of your wing. Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Defend us from the perils and dangers of this night. The almighty and merciful Lord, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, bless us and keep us, Amen."

Tish Warren made it through surgery and afterwards she reflected on her need to pray in that moment. "I needed more than healing, I needed this moment of crisis to find its place in something greater: the vast mystery of God, the surety of God's power, the reassurance of God's goodness." She needed hydration. She ended up writing her whole book *Prayer in the Night* to describe the power of prayer to sustain us through the darkness.

Tish Warren prayed an old prayer that she had memorized as part of her evening devotions, but you don't need a beautiful old prayer to get hydration. Any prayer will do. As we heard earlier in the sermon series, the Spirit is able to translate wordless groans. All you need is a grunt, a cry, a lament, a murmur; all you need is to make your request known to God and the peace of God will hydrate your spirit.

Paul's second piece of survival advice as we journey through suffering is: make sure to take out your map so you can get your bearings. That's verse 8: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things." Paul's first piece of survival advice was aimed at our Spirit; keeping our spirit hydrated with prayer. This is about our mind. How we think. How we reckon things.

In his commentary on these words, Tim Keller observes that when Paul calls us to think about what is excellent or praiseworthy, he's not calling us to 'general loftiness of mind.' He's not asking us to think about fine literature and renaissance art. These good, noble, excellent praiseworthy things are the works of God, the character of God, and the doctrines of God. Paul is calling us to think on who God is; what he's done for us and what he's promised to do. Because when we do that we get our bearings.

When you are on a long hike through difficult terrain, you can get to a point where you're tired and you wonder if you can keep going on, or you can get to confusing points on the trail where you're wondering if you're going the right way. When that happens, it's super helpful to pull out your map. You can get your bearings: I know it doesn't feel like it, but look! We are on the right course! And look how far we've come. Don't give up we are doing well, we are getting there, we're not lost. We can do this.

My seminary professor, Neal Plantinga, used to say that learning doctrine and theology was like learning a map. Good theology was a good life map that could keep you properly oriented. Because in the middle of the journey, especially when you are suffering, you can feel like you are lost, you are tired, and you can feel alone. But look at the map and you see that you are not alone. You see the cross and know that suffering is part of this journey. You see the resurrection and know that suffering is not the end of this journey. You see how God has guided his people in the past, you see where God promises to lead his people in the future, and you can say, through your tears, grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home. In the valley, when the journey is long, take out your map. Think on these things.

Finally, Paul's last piece of survival advice for people going through suffering is, keep walking. Keep moving. Keep going. That's verse 9: "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice and the God of peace will be with you." The first piece of advice was advice for the heart: "keep hydrated." The second piece of advice was for your mind: "look at your map, think on these things." This last piece of advice is for your will. "Keep practicing your faith. Keep doing the things of faith. Keep walking in the faith."

Here Paul is calling us to keep practicing the habits of faith in all the seasons of life. Habits like worship; keep gathering with brothers and sisters in the practice of public worship. Habits like prayer; keep observing the regular times of prayer in your day, in your week. Keep up that practice. Habits like community; make an effort to connect with the family of faith. Build relationships. Practice hospitality. Practice community.

Habits like giving; sharing your time and your resources with those in need in your congregation and your community. Practice kindness and sharing.

When you practice these things consistently during the relatively calm periods of your life, you will be ready when the storms come. That's what all practice is for, isn't it? The young basketball player practices her free throws every day in the gym and on her driveway so that when the pressure is on, she'll be able to make the shot. The young actress practices her lines and her movements for her school play over and over again so that when the lights come on, she will be able to perform.

Did you notice that in the story I told earlier about Tish Warren, when she was in the operating room, the prayer she prayed, the prayer that steadied her was something she had practiced? It was a prayer from the office of complicity. She'd said this prayer a hundred times before going to bed, and I'll bet a lot of the times it seemed like rote habit. She hardly thought about the words. But then in the valley of chaos, because she practiced them, those words were there. Because she had practiced them, she was able to recall them and they steadied her. The God of peace was with her.

And it's really the God of peace who's running this show. I've shared with you three survival tips Paul gives us as we hike through the valley of suffering, but that doesn't mean it's our power that carries us through the valley. It's grace that has brought us safe thus far and grace will lead us home. All these tips are ways to keep our hearts and minds and wills alert to the saving power that's already at work in us through Jesus.

Let me finish with one more story. Tish Warren wrote *Prayer in the Night* in a season of suffering. She had two miscarriages and she lost her Dad. But as she was in the middle of writing the book she got news that she was pregnant again. After losing two babies under traumatic circumstances she admitted that this news brought her joy, but also fear. What if it happened again? She told her two daughters about the pregnancy, the oldest daughter wailed, "The baby is going to die again!" She remembered the pain of the last two losses and she didn't want to do that again. That child was having the same spiritual reaction that a lot of us have with repeated loss and pain; we are afraid to hope because we've been hurt.

But that night, in the face of her fears, that same daughter who said 'the baby is going to die again!', spent hours drawing pictures, all the pictures had the same theme: her new brother. She drew a picture of her family with a baby. She drew a picture of herself as a teenager with her brother. She drew a picture of her brother learning to walk. Warren writes: "This was her way to reach for hope. She was praying in pencil and crayon. She was risking the vulnerability of joy, trusting God that it wasn't a bad risk."

It seems to me that this 9-year-old girl was living Paul's advice in her 9-year-old way. She was making her requests known to God. She was thinking on what was good and excellent and praiseworthy. She was putting her hope into practice. And the God of peace was with her.

About the time that Tish Warren finished her book her baby was born. A healthy boy. They named him Augustine after the saint, though they prefer to call him Gus, and so God turned their mourning into dancing and their tears into songs of joy. Which is what he will do for all his children. ©Rev. Peter Jonker