

DELIVERANCE

“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. A righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all.” (Psalm 34:18-19)

When Christians suggest to non-Christians that they consider placing their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, the non-believers often have a question: *“Why? Why should I follow Jesus? What’s in it for me?”* It’s a fair question, an honest question and a good question. Unfortunately, often Christians don’t have a ready answer. So what they tend to do is to give an answer that is more designed to sell the product than to convey the truth—an answer that usually boils down to one version or another of: *“Well, if you follow Jesus you’ll be a happier person and things will get better in your life.”*

Now there’s a good reason why we shouldn’t be telling non-believers this: it’s not true, it’s not Biblical, it’s not realistic and it’s misleading. All you have to do to see how untrue it is to consider the lives of the men God chose to be his prophets and his Apostles. By no stretch of the imagination would you call their lives “happy” in any normal sense of the word. It’s true, they had joy in their faith—as we do. They knew they had the truth—as we do. They knew they had been called by God to live and work in His Kingdom—as we do. And they had the assurance of eternal life—as we do. But their lives in this world were plagued with troubles—afflictions as the Psalmist calls them. Jeremiah was shunned, thrown in a well and finally led off to slavery with a hook through his nose. Elijah was hunted down like an animal. Isaiah, by tradition, was crammed into a hollow log and sawed in two. Ezekiel spent his adult life in exile. Hosea’s wife abandoned him and became a prostitute. These were not happy lives.

And the Apostles were persecuted during their lives as well. All of them died violent deaths except for John, who died in lonely exile on a tiny island in the Mediterranean. Paul was slandered, flogged, beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked and finally thrown into prison where he died. The Lord had predicted all this when he sent Ananias to baptize Paul, saying: *“I will show [Paul] how much he must suffer for my Name.”*

Now how many people do you think we would draw to Christ by saying: *“Come to our church and we’ll show you how much you must suffer!”* The answer seems obvious to us and so we’re inclined to scuttle the truth of Scripture and adopt the wisdom of this world by trying to sell Christianity as a key to instant gratification. *“Become a Christian and you’ll have happiness now and heaven later! Such a deal!”* Sounds enticing, but how does that square with: *“Take up your cross and follow me?”*

The early Christians said, *“Through much tribulation we must enter into the Kingdom of heaven.”* A lot of modern day pastors say, *“Through comfort and prosperity you can enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.”*

It’s a lie. And like all lies it comes from the Father of lies who loves nothing more than to see the unrealistic expectations of a brand new believer crumble so that he can use their

disappointment to snatch the seed of faith away from them before it's had a chance to take root.

So what IS the truth? The Biblical truth?

Jesus said, *"Count the cost...In this world you will have troubles. But take heart—I have overcome the world."* The Psalmist said, *"A righteous man may have many afflictions, but the Lord delivers him out of them all."* The Word of God makes it crystal clear that anyone who follows Jesus will experience suffering in this world—and the more closely he follows Jesus, the more he is likely to suffer. God will deliver him out of his troubles but he won't necessarily prevent him from having troubles. We are promised deliverance, not avoidance.

To put it another way, instead of being promised success and prosperity in this world, what we are promised is the power to crucify our craving for success and prosperity in this world in order to follow Christ, Who overcame the world through the cross.

The former governor of Minnesota—Jesse "The Body" Ventura—was once quoted as referring to Jesus as, *"...some goofball who got nailed to a cross."* That's the wisdom of this world, my friends, and by the standards of this world, he is absolutely correct. As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth: *"The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."*

Believers will experience suffering: heartbreak, tragedy, sickness, loss—even persecution. That's why God created the institutions of healing we call churches. Churches are supposed to be spiritual hospitals. Unfortunately we have a way of turning them into spiritual country clubs. We would rather pass ourselves off as happy, respectable people who stop by once a week to pay our respects than admit that we are confused, hurting sinners who need God's help to make it through another week. We are spiritual patients—not club members—and we need healing, not respectability. Churches exist for two reasons and two reasons alone: to minister to hurting souls in the Body of Christ and to share the love of Christ by proclaiming the Gospel in Word and deed to the world outside the Body. They have no other reason to exist. And there are two areas I'm going to mention this morning where members of the Body are hurting.

First of all, they're hurting in their marriages. I'm not only talking about marriages where divorce looms in the offing, I'm talking about Christian wives and husbands who have no intention of separating, but who are suffering in the relationships they have with each other. Wives who long to be loved and husbands who long to be respected. Husbands who have withdrawn from their wives and cast their first love upon "something else." Who would rather invest their "quality time" on their jobs, their hobbies or their buddies rather than their wives and children. Wives who retaliate by disrespecting their husbands and diminishing them with constant criticism—the death of a thousand cuts.

Many Christian marriages are riddled with sinful and hurtful behavior where husbands and wives may not have broken each other's bones, but have gone a long way toward devouring each other's flesh. They desperately need renewal—to be delivered out of a lethal cycle of mutual accusation and self-justification. As with most other human problems, the answer lies in trusting and sharing the self-sacrificing love of Christ.

The second area where people are hurting is in their jobs. In the contemporary workplace, any feelings of loyalty between employee and employer are long gone, and with them,

the prospect of stable employment over a period of time. They have been replaced by pure opportunism on both sides.

Companies obsessed with maximizing annual profits—or, if you happen to be owned by an investment banking firm, quarterly profits—are always scrambling to do whatever it takes to make the profit plan. The direct result is that the long term health of the company takes second place, and along with it, the welfare of the employees. Employees are regarded as just another asset—or even liability—necessary to have but always for sale.

Employees in turn—especially managers—are constantly on the lookout for better opportunities for themselves—higher paying jobs, a more successful company, a better location. This game works well for the young and bright and fearless, but for the older and less marketable it is a nightmare. Older employees live with the daily knowledge that their employers would be more than happy to replace them with young, bright and fearless employees who have more energy and ambition and who ask fewer questions. Add to this the ever-present threat of a merger or takeover and you have a good picture of what the worklives of older employees are like.

I knew a man at Nestle who had been president of Libby Foods—one of Nestle's companies—and when his company was sold was reassigned as a vice president of new food ventures. One day, as he was reminiscing about his past worklife, he said, *"I recall the time when I entered the danger zone."* I asked him what the "danger zone" was and he said, *"When I turned fifty."*

Marriage and job. Two major components of people's lives that drive many of them to live what Henry David Thoreau called, *"...lives of quiet desperation."* Both of them show us how little control we really have over our lives. Ever since sin entered the world, the world has been a fickle place to live. That's why the Bible describes this world as a "vale of tears." Even Jesus, who was in perfect communion with the Father, was *"...a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering."* (Isaiah 53:3) The playwright Tennessee Williams said it beautifully in his stage instructions for the production of his famous play, *"The Glass Menagerie."* He directed that the faint sound of carnival music come and go in the background during the performance of his play, because, as he put it: *"No other music so perfectly captures the superficial gaiety and inexpressible sorrow of human life."* We live in a society which constantly bombards us with superficial gaiety—buy more, do more, enjoy more—be happy! The underlying sorrow is ignored, which can lead us to believe that we are alone in our sorrows. Well, take it from an old pastor: there is more sorrow than gaiety in most people's lives.

In light of this, it is good to hearken once again Jesus' words to his disciples on the night before he was crucified: *"In this world you will have troubles. But take heart—I have overcome the world."* Jesus can deliver us out of our troubles—not necessarily by making them go away, but by giving us an eternal perspective on them and by giving us the strength to face them. We can't beat the world on its own terms, because when we try we are dealing with the prince of this world, and we are no match for him. As Luther wrote in *"A Mighty Fortress"*: *"And still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe; his craft and power are great and armed with cruel hate: no one on earth his equal."* But even though we can't overcome the world, Jesus can and has and through Him, we can as well.

Does this mean that we should go around with drooping eyes and a gloomy look on our faces? No. No indeed. And we don't have to. God has given us a precious gift called **hope**. And what faith is for today, hope is for tomorrow. Not just a vague wish that we will

be delivered out of our troubles, but the solid knowledge the Holy Spirit has put in our hearts and that we **will** be delivered out of our troubles. Hope is faith applied to the future, and every believing Christian has it as a gift from God. So wipe the gloomy look off your face and let joy in the assurance of your deliverance shine through. And when people ask you how you can smile through all your troubles, tell them who put the smile on your face. And tell them that if they ask Him, He will do the same for them!

Praise the Lord!

Amen.

Exodus 14:5-14

⁵ When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them and said, “What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!” ⁶ So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him. ⁷ He took six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them. ⁸ The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, so that he pursued the Israelites, who were marching out boldly. ⁹ The Egyptians—all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots, horsemen and troops—pursued the Israelites and overtook them as they camped by the sea near Pi Hahiroth, opposite Baal Zephon.

¹⁰ As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. ¹¹ They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? ¹² Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!”

¹³ Moses answered the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. ¹⁴ The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.”

Psalm 34

¹ I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. ² I will glory in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. ³ Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together.

⁴ I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears. ⁵ Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame. ⁶ This poor man called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles. ⁷ The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.

⁸ Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.

⁹ Fear the LORD, you his holy people, for those who fear him lack nothing. ¹⁰ The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing. ¹¹ Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. ¹² Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days, ¹³ keep your tongue from evil and your lips from telling lies. ¹⁴ Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.

¹⁵ The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their cry;
¹⁶ but the face of the LORD is against those who do evil, to blot out their name from the earth.

¹⁷ The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. ¹⁸ The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

¹⁹ The righteous person may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all; ²⁰ he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken.

²¹ Evil will slay the wicked; the foes of the righteous will be condemned. ²² The LORD will rescue his servants; no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned.

Romans 8:22-28

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

²⁶ In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

John 15:18-21 The World Hates the Disciples

¹⁸ "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. ¹⁹ If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. ²¹ They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me.

³³ "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."