

February 6, 2005

“Persevering”
Acts 21:27-22:21

FCF: Confusion and dismay in the storm

PROPOSITION: (anchor) We can be steadfast in the midst of distressing circumstances,
(magnet) because the things we hold to still hold.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

([READ A Wrinkle in Time, p.56](#)):

(Meg) screamed out, “Charles!” and whether it was to help him or for him to help her, she did not know. The word was flung back down her throat and she choked on it. She was completely alone. She had lost the protection of Calvin’s hand. Charles was nowhere, either to save or to turn to. She was alone in a fragment of nothingness. No light, no sound, no feeling. Where was her body? She tried to move in her panic, but there was nothing to move. Just as light and sound had vanished, she was gone, too. The corporeal Meg simply was not.

This, as those of you who have read Madeleine L’Engle’s [A Wrinkle in Time](#) know, is to “tesser” – to travel through a shortcut in space. Something like the “transporter” on Star Trek except more dramatic. But for the uninitiated, it’s a bit distressing, unnerving.

Which is really like much of life. We’re being “tesserred” all the time. Things we assume would never change do. Things we thought we could take for granted we learn we can’t. Life is often uncomfortable. The equilibrium can be so hard to find.

How do we live in such a world? In a world of constant change yet before a God who never changes, how are we to live? What shape should our lives take?

SCRIPTURE READING: Acts 21:27-22:21

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

([READ Wilma Rudolph biographical summary](#)):

She didn’t get much of a head start in life. A bout with polio left her left leg crooked and her foot twisted inward so she had to wear leg braces. After seven years of painful therapy, she was able to walk without her braces. At age 12 she tried out for a girls basketball team, but didn’t make it. Determined, she practiced with a girlfriend and two boys every day. The next year she made the team. When a college track coach saw her during a game, he talked her into letting him train her as a runner. By age 14 she had outrun the fastest sprinters in the U.S. In 1956 she made the U.S. Olympic team, but showed poorly. That bitter disappointment motivated her to work harder for the 1960 Olympics in Rome – and there Wilma Rudolph won three gold medals, the most a woman had ever won. It’s quite a story – a story of real perseverance through trials.

In a way, so too is the account we read here in Acts 21 and 22. Let me remind you of where we are. Last week we were looking at a crisis in the church of Jerusalem. The Apostle Paul had just returned from his third missionary journey and, while welcomed by the leadership of the church, was sure to be rejected and spurned by many of the others. So, for the good of the whole, he agreed to undergo certain ceremonial rites. This was what he was called to do and he did it. What then happened as a result?

We might expect a happy ending – a revival sweeping through. But instead of a revival, Paul finds himself in the midst of a riot. Notice the verbs in verses 27 through 35 – hands are laid on him, he is seized and dragged, wanted dead, beaten, arrested and bound, incarcerated, carried away by Roman soldiers. What was his response to all this?

Does he cry out, “*God, I’ve served you. I’ve submitted myself to you. And where has it gotten me? That’s it. I’m done.*” Thankfully, no. He presses on. He perseveres. Now as I look at this text, I find myself asking, “Was Paul a man so unlike us? Without feeling? Immovable?” No, certainly he wasn’t. So then the question becomes, “How was he able to respond in such extraordinary ways?” And the answer is this. He was

grounded in certain extraordinary realities. He was held by things that hold, that don't give. And it enabled him to hold steadfast even in the most distressing circumstances.

I. BECAUSE WHAT HOLDS US IS STILL THERE

Think with me as to what grounded Paul through this – the things that still held.

A) The Call

1. Described

The first is the call he received from the Lord – a divine summons to take this message of transforming grace beyond the confines of Israel to the nations. This is the very thing he is describing here – real events, places, and people. Just as real as the screaming crowds.

2. Significance

This call – as Paul knew well and makes clear – was not of his imagination. It was of the Lord's initiative. Its origins were far beyond the apostle and had yet to have been revoked. Despite the opposition of the screaming crowd, his call had not been revoked.

B) The Promise

1. Remembered

Yet with that call came a promise as well. The two are seen wedded together inseparably (**READ Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:8**). There was no place the Lord would lead Paul that He Himself would not go. No task would be given he would have to carry out on his own.

2. Significance

The call and the promise – neither was revoked. All of which is to say that Paul knew he was immortal until his work was done. And the screaming crowd couldn't change that.

Illustration:

William Wilberforce is known for his twenty-year struggle against Great Britain's slave trade. And it was that – a struggle. There were many setbacks. And reminders. On one occasion, tired and frustrated, Wilberforce was reading his Bible. A small piece of paper fell out. It was a letter written by John Wesley. It read (**READ Wesley letter**):

Unless the divine power has raised you up... I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that (abominable practice of slavery), which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? Oh, be not weary of well-doing. Go on in the name of God, and in the power of His might.

That had a steeling effect upon Wilberforce. And it should have the same upon us.

Application:

Not that we will necessarily be called to such grandiose things as he was. But we are all called to great things. Think with me. Doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God. Loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and our neighbor as ourselves. Presenting ourselves as living sacrifices. Are such things small or light? Hardly. Can such things have great effect? Absolutely.

But are such things easy or without difficulty? Within and without there is resistance at every point. How then do we carry on? Partly, the answer has to be gleaned from what we see here – remembering who called us, who set us on the path, and who goes with us every step. Let not your circumstances sway you from your calling.

II. BECAUSE WHAT DRIVES US IS STILL THERE

Let not your circumstances sway you from your calling. Because of who calls you. And because of what He calls you to – those things that hold us, that grip us.

A) Their Condition

Think with me as to the heart condition of the rioting crowd that day.

1. Misplaced zeal

Paul speaks of his own zeal and they were surely zealous as well. Yet zealous for the wrong things. Listen to how he describes this in Romans 10 (**READ Romans 10:1-3**).

2. Misdirected energy

Theirs was a misdirected zeal. And thus a misdirected energy. Hence, the persecution and resistance Paul faced. And he knew it well. For he had been there himself.

B) Our Passion

And so he had a passion that could not be extinguished.

1. For his people

Despite all the opposition – in a way, even because of it. A passion for all peoples – for the Gentiles to whom he had been sent and for the Jews that their hearts might be stirred. Listen to what he says in Romans 9 (**READ Romans 9:1-5**). He loved these people.

2. For God's glory

He longed for them. And for the glory of God – that they might see, know, love, honor, worship, and serve Him. He longed for this in them. And nothing could change that.

Illustration:

Imagine the opening kick of the Super Bowl and the kick returner – after being tackled – gets up, begins to whine, and stomps off the field. Questions arise. “*What did you think was going to happen?*” What did you expect? And where is your passion for the game? That should drive you to get up, shake it off, and plow forward all the harder.

Application:

Ugly circumstances don't erase weighty callings or a godly heart's passions. And if they do, the question needs to be asked, “*What did you think was going to happen?*”

How does this apply? To church building projects and sewer lines, to marriages and hard-to-love spouses, to parenting and hard-to-teach children, to friendships – to every area, every endeavor, every relationship where stakes are high and obstacles great. Let not hard circumstances sway you from the burden the Lord has laid on your heart.

CONCLUSION:

Again, let me take us back to the beginning – this extraordinary response on Paul's part. He was held by things that hold – the call of a God who never leaves His people and the burdens He places upon their hearts. These things hold because of the God who holds. Your outline is misleading. It's not a “what” that holds. It's a “who.”

We can't be reminded of this enough. Luke's prologue to this book – the second volume in a two part work (**READ Acts 1:1**). The Gospel of Luke is what Jesus “began to do and teach.” The Book of Acts – is what He “continued to do and teach.” So everything we see here has Jesus as its driving force. Jesus, the risen and ruling king, as the One holding Paul and putting these burdens on his heart. Jesus, the One holding us and putting the burdens we have upon our hearts. These things don't just go away.

Despite the circumstances, they hold. Circumstances are but the surface, the glaze. We hold because they don't. We hold because He does. He has sent and is sending us. Things are “tessering,” changing, swirling all around us. We should expect that. But we need not, must not, be too quick in our assessments of things. This speaks all the more to the value of prayer, time in the Word, time with each other. Such is what reorients us, deepens our faith, enabling us to see clearly and to stand, to hold.

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