



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

WORDS BEFORE THE BATTLE

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Introduction to Scripture

It was twilight on the night of June 5, 1944. American paratroopers of the 101st Airborne Division finished assembling their packs and chutes, blackening their faces, and preparing to board their transports at their English airbase when an unexpected and prominent visitor appeared. It was none other than their Supreme Commander, General Eisenhower himself, come to send them off. What lay before them across the English Channel was a highly dangerous nighttime jump into enemy-occupied territory, preceding the Normandy invasion the next morning. Ike knew that these men would have the most difficult of jobs. He spoke reassuringly to them, that the full weight of the allied armed forces was with them and that they would be relieved as soon as possible as the infantry pushed inland from their beachhead.

This moment, one of the most dramatic pivotal events in the second world war, was described by Stephen Ambrose in his book “Band of Brothers” (which inspired a hit HBO mini-series of the same name). The phrase “band of brothers,” referring to the 101st Airborne, actually was a quote from Shakespeare. The English King Henry V, in speaking with his men before the critical Battle of Agincourt in the 15th century, called his outnumbered army his “band of brothers.” The king gave one of the most stirring of pre-battle speeches in all literature. His words inspired them on to courageous victory.

These final words before battle come to mind as we open up the Gospel of John to chapter 16. What we find recorded here is the conversation between Jesus and His closest allies—his “band of brothers,”

the disciples—just hours before His arrest, trial, crucifixion and death. We will read a small portion of the account.

I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn over what is going to happen to me, but the world will rejoice. You will grieve, but your grief will suddenly turn to wonderful joy. ²¹It will be like a woman suffering the pains of labor. When her child is born, her anguish gives way to joy because she has brought a new baby into the world. ²²So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again; then you will rejoice, and no one can rob you of that joy ...

³³I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.”

John 16:20-22, 33 (NLT)

In its context, these words are both **similar** to the final words of General Eisenhower and King Henry to their troops, and yet **different** in one significant way. All the final words before battle communicate the importance of the struggle before them, preparing people for difficulties, and reassuring them that they are not alone. In the case of the 101st Airborne, the soldiers would be at great risk while their General remained behind in England. In the case of the English forces at Agincourt, King Henry would be fighting alongside his men. But in what was about to happen in Jerusalem, it would be their General and King, Jesus, who would fight the battle singlehandedly. He alone would go to the cross, and would do so on behalf of all His disciples (including us today). And once He won His great victory—defeating evil and sin and, ultimately, death itself—He would then be alongside us to help us whenever we face our own subsequent battles.

No Fast Passes in Life

The final words of John 16 are profoundly true: “Here on this earth you **will** have many trials and sorrows.” Jesus does not say “maybe, if you’re really unlucky, you might encounter a problem or two in life.” You and I and everyone **will**, as long as we are on this earth, face various trials and sorrows. Nobody gets a free pass, a pain-free and struggle-free ticket through an entire lifetime.

Years ago when the new “fast pass” system was first instituted at Walt Disney World, it caused resentment and grumbling from the people who had been standing in long lines to enter the attractions. Rumbblings of jealousy and complaints emerged because those few people who had figured out the system got to skip to the head of the line and avoid the suffering of interminable waiting. Now, of course, the “fast pass” system is accepted, and used by many. But we all know that Disney World is a fantasyland. There are no “fast passes” in life to avoid all trouble. Those born into poor families and those with proverbial silver spoons all will eventually face their share of troubles. The recent Hollywood hit “All the Money in the World” reminded us that even the world’s richest family wasn’t immune to great trials and tragedies.

Every person’s life has a unique set of joys and trials, opportunities and complications. Our challenges are as distinctive as our fingerprints. Some of us are called to fight a battle against a terrible disease inside our bodies, some to fight depression or alcohol dependency, some to struggle with a failing business or a really difficult person in our family. Some have been abused or wounded in childhood, and some have made mistakes that are hard to recover from. Every one of us deals continually with the built-in battle inside that is the condition of all human beings. We face temptations from within our own sinful desires and selfishness, and we face temptations from a world of imperfect people and society around us. When we pray the “Lord’s Prayer,” we are acknowledging our need of God’s daily help to resist temptation and be protected from the evil that’s always close at hand.

Overcoming

Let me put our scripture text in the context of what is happening in the life of our congregation. These words from our Supreme Commander Jesus are intended to prepare and equip us for the struggles of life. They assure us that, though there may be setbacks (“you will weep and mourn”), our Lord will be there to see us through to ultimate victory. In Him we can be Overcomers.

Today is the Sunday each year when we welcome the children and staff of the New Horizons ministry in Southwest Florida. They bless us with the gift of song. And we remind our congregation of the opportunities to do volunteer ministry with after-school tutoring of elementary and middle schoolers. We invite you to consider a special financial gift to support their critical work. But it brings to us in vivid reality the challenges these young men and women are facing. Most of their parents came here as first-generation immigrants, and many have struggled greatly to learn a new language and culture and make a living. But their children, our New Horizons kids, have such amazing potential. With a hand up they can learn and grow and become valuable contributors to our lives. Some of them may one day care for you in a hospital or nursing home, serve you in a retail establishment or restaurant, repair your home, or do your taxes. We invest our time and our treasure in them because we believe it's a sound investment.

The holy task of assisting them (with a hand up, not a hand out) is one our church and community have embraced because it's part of what has made America great. We are a nation of immigrants. Each wave of new citizens who come to our shores goes through the process of assimilating and becoming American. It started with my immigrant ancestors from Scotland in the 17th century, along with English and Dutch. Through waves of Irish and Italians, Germans and Norwegians, Africans and Chinese and Indians and Koreans and Mexicans and Vietnamese—the common thread is that a new life in the new world is possible.

But it doesn't come without struggle, or without support from others. We are convinced that the most powerful and lasting thing we can do to help our newest Americans is to help them not only to learn and grow in academic and vocational and social skills, but to plant within them a faith in the Lord that will sustain them for life. Since they face the same temptations and challenges every human does, they need Jesus to guide and strengthen them. It will be His Spirit within that will help them to overcome the challenges and disadvantages they have faced at the start of their lives. If they become

His disciples, His promise applies to them: “Take heart, because I have overcome the world.”

What Matters Most

A landmark psychological study published a few months ago, headed by a University of Virginia professor, has shown surprising light on the inner qualities that make some people successful in life in spite of facing, in the words of Jesus in our text, “many trials and sorrows.” The study has followed for decades people who have undergone significant hardships or challenges in their childhood and youth. The problems have included poverty, loss of a parent (through death or divorce), abuse, mental illness in a parent or sibling, imprisonment of a parent, or frequent moves. About two-thirds of children who go through one or more of these crises in childhood have long-term—even life-long—wounds and dysfunction. But about one-third of them not only overcome but even turn out to be super-achievers. Some become presidents, CEOs, all-star athletes, artists and entertainers, entrepreneurs and trailblazers. That high-accomplishment group embody the phrase of the German philosopher: “What doesn’t kill me makes me stronger.” What is it that explains this difference? How can two people go through nearly identical problems and yet turn out so different?

One memorable set of interviews was with two brothers who had grown up in a home with an alcoholic, abusive and womanizing father. The one brother struggled all his life: broken marriages and relationships, illegitimate children, failed careers, struggles with alcohol and drugs, bankruptcy—a sad litany of dysfunction. The other brother achieved educational honors, rose to a high rank in a major corporation, had a faithful marriage and stable home, attended church weekly, and was greatly respected in his community. When each was asked privately why their lives followed the course they did, each replied with identical words: “Given the father I had, how could I have done otherwise?” How ironic. And how profound. They had the same experience, but their reactions took them in opposite directions.

Why? Because what really matters is what is inside us, not our outer circumstances. The second brother, the one who overcame his terrible childhood, made the decision in his own will that he would not allow his father's example to control him, but would choose the other way. The first brother never made that inner connection. He allowed himself to be controlled and handicapped by his pain. Ultimately, brother number one was bitter at God and blamed Him for his father's bad choices. Brother number two turned towards God for strength and saw God not as a Tormenter but a Redeemer from his difficult circumstances.

No Grounds for Complaint

If our Creator had somewhere promised a pain-free and problem-free life, we might have grounds for complaint. If a "fast pass" around life's difficulties were available, we might feel that we all deserve one. But that is simply not true. Nowhere in scripture do we find any promise of such a fantasy. Instead, the Bible gives us a dose of reality mixed with hope. "Here on this earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."

Be prepared, my friend in Christ. Challenges and difficulties yet lay before you. For many of us, the hardest challenge of all—facing our own death—still awaits. But we will not give in to fear. And we will not surrender to panic or dread. Because we are not, and never will be, alone in facing our challenges. Jesus is with us. He, the One who took on death for us and overcame it by His resurrection, has guaranteed He will live within us through His Spirit and will never leave us or forsake us. Through Him, no matter what our childhood, our handicaps, our mistakes and our weaknesses, we, too, can be Overcomers. ■