



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Storms in the Valley

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ SEPTEMBER 9, 2018

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

¹⁹So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

1 Peter 4:12-13, 19

A Lesson from Nature

A naturalist was exploring and doing research in the Rocky Mountains one summer day. He was high up, close to the peak above 12,000 feet, when he looked down into the valley below and saw it totally socked in by clouds. One of the typical summer storms had settled in, and he could hear the thunder echoing around the surrounding hills. Then, suddenly, a sight caught his eyes and took his breath away. Breaking through the clouds and climbing strongly towards the sun was a majestic bald eagle. Its wings were glistening and shiny from the rain that had fallen on it. The eagle had been caught below in the downpour, but that storm was sending it up above the clouds. The man wrote in his journal what he had seen.

And later that night, in reviewing his notes from the day, he reflected upon the experience of that eagle. It was the storm in the valley that drove him to the heights. The man, a Christian, suddenly realized the spiritual lesson he had witnessed. Many times in his own

life, he remembered, it had been difficult experiences of hardship or sorrow or suffering that had prompted him to “soar upward” to the Lord. Before the storm came that afternoon, the eagle was content to remain below, resting on a tree branch in the valley; only the storm caused him to seek higher ground. In the same way, the man thought, it’s often the challenges and trials of life that prompt us to seek God; otherwise we can become content with neglecting Him.

It’s been true in my own life, and maybe in yours as well. Nobody enjoys, nobody seeks out, and nobody prefers to go through the “storms” of life’s trials and challenges. We much prefer an unbroken string of career success, good health, financial prosperity, family harmony, a booming bull stock market and real estate market, and a world at peace. But the reality of life is not always what we’d like. And the most critical question for each one of us is: *How will I handle it, when the storms come to my valley?*

Assumptions

For the next few minutes I will attempt to guide our thoughts on this unpleasant undeniability: that into each of our lives some rain will fall. And as we think about this, I’m going to make three assumptions. The **first assumption** is that no one but the worst masochist would actually wish to go through pain or trial. My **second assumption** is that I am addressing this message to Christians, followers of Jesus Christ the Lord, who have placed their trust for their eternal destiny in Him.

When we’ve settled the ultimate question of our faith and our future security beyond death, when we know and cling to the confidence that the worst thing that can happen to a Christian—death—is just the prelude to the best thing of all, then we’re ready to talk about the comparatively minor challenges and trials of daily living with a bed-rock security. My **third assumption**, then, is that it is right and appropriate to take advantage of any and all means that are legal and moral to try to relieve suffering, improve our situation, or get out of a bad circumstance. There’s no virtue in needless pain and misery.

We are blessed to have many things available to us—from medical care to professional help to financial resources to our supportive friends and church—to get through the storms of life (and to refuse or ignore these provisions of the Lord is insulting to Him). With those assumptions as our underpinning, let me touch on a few principles, based on Scripture, that can help us to face and overcome life’s storms and trials.

Principle 1: A Christian Expects to Face Trials in Life.

This is what verse 12 of our text says very plainly: “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” Having the right expectation is important in anything. A friend of mine had to undergo brutal cancer treatments a number of years ago. His oncologist prepared him and his wife very carefully and precisely for the side effects he would experience: nausea, weight loss, dizziness, etc. And, sure enough, they happened just as the doctor had predicted. While they were not fun to go through, my friend told me that the emotional toll of anxiety and fear and worry would have been much greater had he not been prepared in advance for what to expect.

Preparing for any challenging endeavor requires that we make sure our expectations are accurate. Look at the difference in the end results of two separate expeditions. In the early 17th century a British adventurer gained permission from the Queen to form a new colony in America. He recruited his first wave of settlers by making lavish and unrealistic promises of what lay ahead of them on the other side of the Atlantic. The recruiter guaranteed that life in the new world would be wonderful and comfortable, that the land was bursting with food, the weather was temperate year-round, the natives were welcoming, and the servants they were taking along with them would do all the hard work.

When they got to the American wilderness they found a very different reality. Discouragement and despair set in—and that colony struggled and barely survived because the settlers weren’t properly

prepared for what it would take to scratch out a toe-hold on a new continent.

Look at the contrast, three centuries later, when another English explorer began to recruit for another expedition. Ernest Shackleton wanted to take a team of die-hards all the way to the South Pole and back. And this was the advertisement he placed in the newspaper, *The Times* of London:

Men wanted for hazardous journey.
Small wages, bitter cold,
long months of complete darkness,
constant danger. Safe return doubtful.
Honor and recognition in case of success.

Now that's realism! Because of it, the team he recruited were prepared for what they would face—and they have gone down in history as one of the most courageous and effective teams of explorers the world has ever seen. I believe God has provided us with a similar dose of realism in scripture. Don't expect that life will always be easy. And don't think that you deserve a problem-free and pain-free life. Be prepared, and you'll be more able to face and overcome adversity.

Principle 2: A Christian Finds Good in the Midst of Trials.

This is why Peter (and, in other places, Paul and James and other writers in the New Testament) repeatedly reminds us to look for things to be thankful about and rejoice in, even when the storms of life are breaking around us. We have been reminded over the past year here in the drought-plagued southeastern U.S. that, though storms and showers may be temporarily inconvenient and can ruin a golf or tennis game, a day at the beach or on the fishing boat, those rains are a blessing because they renew our water table and nourish our plants for future growth. Trials and challenges can truly bring greater growth for us in the long term—like the rains that replenish our lawns. If we have no challenges, we won't grow.

One blessing that can come to us from having to go through hard times is a greater connection to others. This is what God has beauti-

fully designed His Church to do: to be a support and help to one another. And we take turns in doing this for each other. Years ago I had surgery for some orthopedic repair work, and this church was incredibly supportive to me in that time. In times when I'm healthy, I have the privilege of passing that love and support on to some of you as you go through hard times.

We saw in our own community in the past year a reminder of how storms can bring us together. Hurricane Irma was a storm that helped to bring us closer together. That's one of the blessings that comes to Christians in the church when we have the privilege of taking turns in supporting and caring for one another. There are people here this morning who would personally testify that being part of a caring church was nice when everything was going smoothly for them, but it became **necessary** when they encountered hard times.

I believe that one other blessing we receive from the storms of life is a deeper gratitude and appreciation for the good things God gives us. We take so much for granted. And then, when we lose them for awhile, those gifts become much more precious. One of the stories I read coming out of our military in its service in Iraq to try to bring peace to that shattered land concerned a U.S. soldier who barely escaped a roadside bombing. When the blast went off, his vehicle was rocked and his ears were concussed, rupturing the eardrums. For awhile he had no hearing, and then one ear was surgically repaired. While his hearing is now permanently cut in half, he proclaims that he is ten times more grateful for one working ear than he was prior to his injury for his two ears. Whenever he hears music today, he whispers a prayer of thanks to God for the blessing of hearing. There may be things you and I take for granted now, and someday we will be reminded in an overwhelming way of God's merciful gifts to us.

Principle 3: A Christian Seeks the Lord in Times of Trial.

This is what Peter tells us in our final verse: that we should "commit ourselves to our faithful Creator." This is what the eagle demonstrated in the Rockies: the storm drove it upward.

We need to be reminded to seek God at all times, but especially when we undergo trials and challenges. Our natural “default mode”—the approach to life that seems most comfortable to us—is self-reliance and independence. By instinct, we try to solve our own problems and work out our own solutions. But God doesn’t intend for us to live like that. He wants us to take our needs to Him, to rely on Him and trust in Him. It’s the way He made us: to be **dependent** rather than independent; to function best when we’re **connected** rather than isolated.

The words of the Apostle Peter were written not only to future generations of believers, like us, but also to a very specific situation in his own times. Bible scholars believe that the congregation who received this letter written in Peter’s own handwriting were about to experience a wave of government-sponsored persecution and attacks—and the Apostle, as a wise pastor, was trying to prepare them and ready them for what lay ahead. Those first readers would certainly have rather received soothing words and empty promises: “Don’t worry. Everything will be fine. God will protect you from having to face any hardships or problems.” What a popular message that would have been. But it wouldn’t have been true.

Always with Us

Though we’re still a few months away from it, we all have certain traditions we will enjoy again this year during the Christmas season. One of our family traditions is to watch our favorite Christmas-themed movies—and there are some real classics. Perhaps you, too, will watch *It’s a Wonderful Life* or *White Christmas* or *Miracle on 34th Street* or *A Christmas Story* or one of the film versions of Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol.” Our favorite Christmas movie is a touching story called *Prancer*. It’s about an 8-year-old girl, still feeling intensely the recent death of her mother, who is having repeated conflicts with her father. She decides to run away from home, but then she’s hurt and is brought back. The movie ends, in a scene I still can’t watch with dry eyes, as father and daughter reconcile.

The little girl says, “I didn’t really mean to run away, Daddy. I just wanted you to find me, and tell me everything was going to be okay.” The father replies, “I can’t tell you everything is always going to be okay. Things will always be hard around here. We might even lose our farm one day. But I promise that I’ll never lose you. And I’ll always be with you.” The little girl embraces her father with a clinging hug. She now feels secure.

I believe that’s what our Heavenly Father wants to say to us today, through His Word. He doesn’t promise us that life will always be okay—at least not in the sense that it will be problem-free and pain-free. But He does assure us that He’ll always be with us. And isn’t that the greatest security we could ever want? ■

