

### **Jeremiah 17:5-8**

Thus says the Lord: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.

### **Matthew 5:1-12**

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

### **You Can't Predict Predestination**

#### **“Heaven Help Us”**

**Rev. Charles Schuster**

Jesus said - get this - "Happy are those who persecuted for righteousness' sake, yours is the kingdom of heaven." "Happy are you when people revile and persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, your reward is great in heaven." Very strange thing to say, and very strange that someone would pick it up and say it to groups of people. "Rejoice and be glad if you're persecuted, if people speak unkindly about you, rejoice and be glad." I agree with Thomas Long, who spoke about the old woman who, when she heard about Darwin's of evolution, exclaimed, "Oh my, I hope it isn't true, but if it is, I hope it won't be widely known."

Happy are we? Are we happy when we're persecuted for what's right? Life is tough, it's difficult. Happy are we? Are we happy? Our reward is great in heaven? Is that when it all makes sense, after we die? How can we be happy when we're persecuted for what is right? Most of us don't set out to do the wrong thing, and if we have to confess our sins to a priest or a pastor, we have to think about it for a while and come up with one or two. Carlisle Marney had a good friend who was a priest, I've mentioned this before. The priest said to him one day, he said, "You know what it is to have to listen to the

confessions of nuns?" He said, "It's like being stoned to death with popcorn." And most of us, before we confess our sin, we'd have to go out and commit one so we could confess something. Most of the sins we think we ought to confess are really not even sins, they're just mistakes. Bad judgment. I mean, you have to do more living to do more sinning to spend time confessing, so we try to do the right thing, and we're persecuted for it. We're persecuted for doing right. Life is tough. To live is to suffer, and we're happy about that? We're supposed to be happy for doing what is right, and being punished? Is that what Jesus said? I hope it isn't true. And if it's true, I hope it doesn't become widely known.

This morning, heaven help us, we're going to think about being happy when we know we might not ought to be. We begin with a truth. Let's face it, life's hard. Let's face it, there's nothing easy about life. Two old people eating dinner at a restaurant, the waitress came upon the conversation and kind of listened in. The woman said to the man, "You know, it would be nice if we could turn back the clock and live life over." And then he said to her, "You know what I'd like? I'd like to be eighteen years old again, but to know what I know now." At this point the waitress sat down in the chair at the table and said, "I'm eighteen. What do you know?"

Well, you know what it is, to live is to suffer, and you face it. I mean, when you turn thirty, your hairline recedes and sometimes it just goes away. I don't know where it goes. And sometimes, when you turn forty, you're reading a newspaper, and you have to keep getting the page of the newspaper further and further away. They don't tell you about that, but it happens. And then there are joints you don't even know you've got, that begin to act up, and you begin to feel body parts that fail, and the order of the family is reversed, and you move up to the point that you become the elder, but you'd rather be the younger.

A New York City judge was mugged. He held a press conference, and at the press conference he said, "This mugging will in no way affect my decisions in the courtroom on matters of this kind." And a reporter, a Helen Thomas type of reporter, stood up and said, "Then mug him again." Life is tough, and it mugs us until we face it. Richard Brack, a member of our church, sent me this attachment and suggested it might make a good sermon topic. It's one of those church bulletin boards like we've got out there, only this one listed the activities that happened in the church. This particular week it announced in the congregational activities that Monday, the Alcoholics Anonymous group would meet, on Tuesday the abused spouses would meet, and on Wednesday the eating disorder group would meet, and on Thursday, the Say No to Drugs task force would meet, and on Friday the teen suicide watch hotline would meet, and on Saturday would be the soup kitchen. Then Sunday announced the sermon title, which was "America's Joyous Future."

Let's face it. When we look, we see life is hard. It is for us, but as you know, it's always been, and you don't have to look very far to see that. All you have to do is look in the Biblical text, it's just one thing after another. The Bible's full of stories of human pain. David suffered the death of his son Absalom. Job suffered the loss of everything, including family members. Mary watched her son Jesus die on the cross, and Israel as a nation suffered, and from various times they cried out in Hebrew, they cried out, "If we're the chosen people, God, would you please choose somebody else?"

This past week, a friend and I did something that is as difficult as it ever happens in life. We took the ashes of his son to the Poudre River. The river was raging. We had imagined a tranquil scene, but it was not. Whitecaps, and logs floating like matchsticks, and the water was the color of church coffee with a little bit of that powdered milk in it, you know? And while we were in the middle of doing this, somebody walked up to us with a flyer, and on the flyer was a picture of a friend who had been inner-tubing and hadn't been seen since, and wanted to know, if we saw anything, would we please call her.

Let's face it, life is hard. Theologians will tell you that. Heidegger called it the given, he called it the *das*, it's the up-againstness, it's the stuff that makes life what it is, and Heidegger and other theologians will tell you, you want to run away from that, but don't. Lean into it if you can. Because if you start anesthetizing yourself from the hard things, you won't be able to experience the good things. Life is hard, let's face it, because it is. But we do something with it. Let's pace it. Let's put it in perspective. Six years ago a golfer, George Archer, was on the senior PGA tour. He was reflecting on all the surgeries he had had. "My knee is only a few months old, but my back is only 17 years old, and I just recently got a new hip." And then he looked reflectively and said, "I might, you know, be too young to be on the senior golf tour now."

Life is hard, but we pace it. Hard times come, but they don't last. Tough people outlast tough times, if we pace it. Jeremiah had the right idea when he said, blessed is the person who can endure the hard times, for that person who trusts in God is like a tree planted by the water, that sends out roots by the stream, and that tree doesn't fear it when the heat comes or when there's a drought in the land because its leaves are always green. It's not anxious. We can endure the tough times because we know that they will end.

When I was a pastor in First United Methodist Church in Boulder, we had a bell choir director who liked to annoy me by having her bell choir play long anthems on those days when we had multiple baptisms. And these anthems would go on and on. And I'd sit there, thinking about the time going by, and lunch coming up, and people would be looking at their watches, and the bell choir would play another verse of the same verse that they'd played twice before. Now let me say this. Bell choir music is just beautiful. It's just beautiful. But I want to tell you, twenty-five minutes of it in the middle of a worship service... By the time I'd bet to preach my sermon, I'd be an absolute wreck, because I'd have about five minutes left for a twenty-five minute sermon. I can speak fast enough that I could do it, but it just really was getting to me until one day, on Sunday morning, I realized two things. As the bell choir was into their anthem, I realized it's got to end, because they're going to run out of notes. And then I realized I could fire the bell choir director.

When life is hard, we pace it. We just pace it. We put it into perspective. Sean Penn said it once, he said, "I'm not going to ever have a good day more magical than that time when I first heard my little daughter giggle." I bet these people understand that. It's never going to get bad, because I can remember that. Whatever happens, it won't take that away. I saw a bumper sticker this week, it was a truck that was stopped at the light at

Pitkin and College. The message on the back of the bumper conveyed a means to pace life and put things in perspective, but it came in the form of a question. It said, "When was the last time you did something for the first time?" So Friday, I asked the parents and some of the children at Vacation Bible School that question. When was the last time you did something for the first time? And one of the adults said, "Well, the last time I did something for the first time, was when I agreed to teach in the Vacation Bible School." And another adult said, "Well, one of the things that I did for the first time, which recently I did was, my husband and I wallpapered the bathroom." And I thought, you know, a lot of marriages can't survive that. And then one of the kids who was there said, "Well last week for the first time, I ate five hamburgers."

Doing for the first time, taking on something new, helps us pace life, and get ourselves centered. Marilyn Brown Oden, she's a theologian, and she said, "To the degree that we experience centeredness within the self, we are emptied of self-centeredness." We learn who we are, and we also get in touch with who we are becoming, if we pace life, and put things in perspective. I love the story of the son of the Baptist preacher who decided to baptize his cats, seven years old. The baptismal was up in the bathtub filled with water in the house. The first cat was a kitten, and it was dunked before it realized what was happening, but the other cat was a large tomcat, and as it was being brought toward the water there was a fierce encounter that involved hissing and clawing and bloodletting, and the cat won, and ran off, and the seven-year-old yelled at the cat, "Fine, be a Methodist if that's what you want to be."

Pace life. It means we put off dunking them, if we have to, and it means sometime, we're going to get dunked, but we put it in perspective. If we have to be a Methodist or a masochist or a master of nothing. If we're missing in action or a man or a woman who lost or who's come in last, or who wished and missed, or who was rejected or neglected, we pace it, because we'll get it next time. Because we're going to try again, we're going to keep in the hunt, we hurt if we have to, but we'll pace it, we'll it all back in perspective and try something for the first time, the next chance we get.

Face it and pace it, okay. But how do we get happy? How do we feel blessed? Because that's what Jesus said, you feel blessed, and you feel happy. Well, we've got to find a way to grace it. That's the third thing, we grace it, by God. We grace it by looking forward to the day as it comes, to the new life as it dawns, and to the next chapter of the book, or to the coming attractions. Is there heaven ahead of us? Some say it's nothing, and they tell us to stop looking. Others say it's everything, and they tell us what they think it is. I don't think it's nothing, and I doubt if it's everything people say it is, but I think it's something, and that something keeps us going, and makes life be graced.

Oprah Winfrey wrote a book entitled, *Words that Matter*. She introduces the book by telling us, "Every day, you and I experience valleys and victories, and that contains the seeds of grace, which provides the lessons for us for the whole journey in life ahead." Martin Buber, a Jewish theologian, Biblical scholar, wrote a book entitled *The Eclipse of God* in which he said, "We can glance up to God with our mind's eye, and we can see what God can see." To glance up to God is to be graced in life. When life is tough, we

grace it. And by that we mean, we look at life the way God looks at life, and we see the whole stage, not just the part of the set that we're in. We see the good that comes in the bad that happens. We see how God is grace in the here and now, as well as in the great by-and-by, for if we look from God's eyes, we see a whole different world, for heaven's sake, heaven help us. Jesus said, "Your reward is great in heaven." It's like the family driving through Kansas, and the five-year-old looked out the window and said, "It's so flat out there, but you know, you can look further than you can see." It's out there where we are, but it's beyond there what we know. It's the present as we have it, but it's the future tense that we will never see. Is there heaven? Is there an ultimate destination? "Your reward is great in heaven," Jesus said, beyond what is, what is? Some say it's nothing. How do they know? Some say it's everything. When did they see it? I say it's something, after we die, that gives us dignity to our pain, gives honor to our suffering, it gives grace to our pacing and to our facing, and it's better than we think, and it's bigger than we imagine, and it's more powerful than our fear of the unknown. It's vindication, it's justice, it's ultimate truth fulfilled the way it's supposed to be.

There's a story going around, you know, about all these schools are changing chairs, and the musical game of college sports, where the Huskers are now going to be the Big Ten's twelfth team, and the Buffs they can go to the Pac or whatever, and the mountain west gets noisy got Boise, and there's this story going around, and it could be a Ram tale. Spring practice, a Ram football player looked down and noticed a suspicious-looking but unknown white powdery substance on the practice field. The FBI was called in. Did you hear about this? The FBI was called in, and after a complete field analysis, the FBI determined that the white substance was the goal line. And it was speculated that the unknown substance was new to the team because they so rarely have crossed it. It is the goal line. It is the end of the line that is the beginning of time, when all things taken are given back, and all the columns subtracted are added up. It's there for the Rams and their fans. It's a goal line, and it is where life leads, and where all things make sense. It's the speculation of reward that is speculation itself becoming the reward. It's looking to the best that ever can be, that transforms the worst that ever has been into something that makes us happy and helps us feel blessed. If we know our ultimate destiny, we can trust our intimate experience and grace it. We can. Singer Bono has known it, he even got it. He said, "A number of years ago I met a wise man who changed my life in countless ways, large and small. I was always seeking the Lord's blessing. I was saying, you know, 'This is a new song. Lord, would you bless it?' Or 'I have a family here, would you please look after them?' And this wise man said to me, 'Stop. Stop asking God to bless what you're doing, and get involved in what God's doing, because that's already been blessed.'"

Blessed are we when we figure that our job is larger than we know, that our vision is further than we see, that our mission is greater than we can achieve in one lifetime. Because the goal is out there, because the ultimate is in us, because life is hard, because it's tough, because we are put here to do something important, which is why it's tough. Blessed are the poor in spirit and the meek and the pure in heart and the peacemakers and those who are persecuted for what is right, for our reward is great, not on earth, but in heaven. We can face it and we can pace it, if we can grace it, we can be happy, it is true,

and it has become widely known. We have problems on earth, yes. But our reward is great in heaven