

Against All Odds

God has it!!

Today I have some stories for you. My hope is that one of these stories is helpful. Today reflect on some scripture. My hope is that it will be helpful.

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” (Phil. 4 v 4-8)

What I most want for you today is to know, remember and dwell in one simple, but profound truth. Friends, if you remember nothing else from this talk, perhaps you would do well to remember this: God has it! He really does! God has it.

I read this story at the end of the last talk I gave. I read it because I think it's what we're thinking about and because it's vital to living well

The Keeper of the Springs

There once was a town high in the Alps that straddled the banks of a beautiful stream. The stream was fed by springs that were old as the earth and deep as the sea.

The water was clear like crystal. Children laughed and played beside it; swans and geese swam on it! You could see the rocks and the sand and the rainbow trout that swarmed at the bottom of the stream.

High in the hills, far beyond anyone's sight, lived an old man who served as Keeper of the Springs. He had been hired so long ago that now no one could remember a time when he wasn't there. He would travel from one spring to

another in the hills, removing branches or fallen leaves or debris that might pollute the water. But his work was unseen.

One year the town council decided they had better things to do with their money. No one supervised the old man anyway. They had roads to repair and taxes to collect and services to offer, and giving money to an unseen stream cleaner had become a luxury they could no longer afford.

So, the old man left his post. High in the mountains, the springs went untended; twigs and branches and worse muddied the liquid flow. Mud and silt compacted the creek bed; farm wastes turned parts of the stream into stagnant bogs.

For a time, no one in the village noticed. But after a while, the water was not the same. It began to look brackish. The swans flew away to live elsewhere. The water no longer had a crisp scent that drew children to play by it. Some people in the town began to grow ill. All noticed the loss of sparkling beauty that used to flow between the banks of the streams that fed the town. The life of the village depended on the stream, and the life of the stream depended on the keeper.

The city council reconvened, the money was found, the old man was rehired. After yet another time, the springs were cleaned, the stream was pure, children played again on its banks, illness was replaced by health, the swans came home, and the village came back to life.

The life of the village depended on the stream.

The stream is your soul. And you are the keeper.¹

Here's what I'm thinking. Paul tells us to be anxious for nothing. The truth is there are lots of things that clog up our lives and, like the town, when that happens, we can suffer. Paul, I think, gives us some help in how we might keep the stream clear, so that we might live well. We know only too well what life can throw at us – the things that might work to clog up the stream: a pandemic; a divorce; a death; financial insecurity; no job; challenging children; challenging parents; health concerns.

¹ Ortberg J. "Soul Keeping" Zondervan 2014 page 13.

Paul won't and doesn't tell us these things won't happen, but he does help us to navigate them well. By the time Paul writes his letter to the Philippians, he knows the challenges life can bring. If anyone did, Paul had many reasons to be anxious. Paul writes his letter from a Roman prison, his fate uncertain – a possible death sentence. He is around 60 years old. He has been a follower of Christ for 30 years. He has travelled all around the Mediterranean coast, visiting most seaports at some time.

He is hunched from his travels and his many beatings. He has been given thirty lashes on five different occasions; on one occasion he was beaten and left for dead. He has been shipwrecked, survived storms and been abandoned by his friend and co-workers. From his letter to the Galatians we know he may well be almost blind, (Galatians 4 v 15). He now lives in the time when Nero kills Christians to win favour with the Romans, and Paul is in a Roman prison, the best known of all Christians.

And yet, and yet, Paul is able to write to the believers in Philippi: "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice!" (4v4)

Paul tells them not to be anxious, but to rejoice! It begs the question: what is Paul really doing and what is Paul really saying? Paul uses the present continuous tense when he says rejoice. It means he is saying to go on rejoicing, make it a habit! And, he says, do it always! Always? That's a bit tough, isn't it? Sometimes would be more realistic, wouldn't it? When things are going well would be even better!

But, Paul says: "Always!" "Rejoice in the Lord always!" And then just to make the point, he says: "Again I say, Rejoice!"

So, what is Paul not saying is that we must be happy all the time! That's impossible, and he's not saying that. Paul is not here talking about creating or manufacturing a feeling or emotion that enables us to be happy or to rejoice. Paul is inviting us to hold a conviction and confidence that God exists, that he is sovereign and that he is good. Let that sink in for a moment.

Paul is inviting us to hold a conviction and confidence that God exists, that he is sovereign and that he is good. Maybe you could say that Paul is inviting us to a vital optimism about God.

John Ortberg says this about vital optimism:

Vital optimism is the confident expectation that an all-powerful God is at work even in this fallen world, to redeem it and to bring good out of it. It is also the confident expectation that this good and powerful God is intimately aware and deeply concerned about my life, my future and the role he wants me to play in his world, which means I can face today with a resilient confidence and unshakeable poise, not because things will work out for me, but because an all-powerful, all good God is at work.

Paul invites us to “Rejoice in the Lord!” What we believe about God is absolutely critical.

I think this true story might help us to see what Paul is driving at.

It was pristine winter day with the sun glistening off of the newly fallen snow. I had been flying for about an hour and was turning my Cessna 172 for final approach to runway 24 at Palwaukee Municipal Airport, north of Chicago. I could tell that my instructor was pleased.

Though relatively new at it, I was getting the feel for flying. Moments later, I made what I thought to be a nearly perfect landing. Without comment on my landing, my instructor spoke up. “it’s time to go under the hood. Yes, you definitely are ready for time under the hood.” I wasn’t sure to what he was referring. My first thought was he was going to show me the plane’s engine. I asked him what he meant. He reached around behind him and pulled out a strange-looking device.

“We are going to take off as usual and head north away from the O’Hare traffic. Once we get to five thousand feet and forty miles from trouble, you’re going to put this thing on and fly the plane.” He explained. The device was designed to fit like a baseball cap but had a large shield that allowed the pilot to see only his instruments. I followed his instructions and flew out over the Illinois-Wisconsin state line. Once we were in the desired locations and at the right altitude he turned to me and said, “Okay, put this on. When you do, you will not be able to see outside the plane. You will only see the controls and your instruments. Here is what I want you to remember: No matter what, trust your instruments, not your feelings.”

He then took control of the plane and began to make all sorts of manoeuvres. Without the ability to look out the window and see the horizon or ground, I became disorientated. I really wasn’t sure if we were turning, climbing, or descending. He began to instruct me what to do next. “Imagine you have just

flown into a cloud or are trying to land in fog. Without outside reference point, you will feel like you feel right now, disorientated. What you need to remember is to trust your instruments, not your feelings.”

After several minutes of flying ‘under the hood,’ it became apparent how important his admonition truly was. Everything in my body said I was in level flight, but the artificial horizon, and instrument that tells the pilot the orientation of his wings to the horizon, indicated that I was in a turn and descending. “If you don’t trust your instruments you will enter what is known as the dead man’s spiral and crash. What’s worse, you will never know what hit you. That is why you must trust your instruments and not your feelings.” warned my instructor.

Tragically, that is probably what happened to John F. Kennedy Jr. on July 16, 1999. John, his wife, and his sister-in-law were flying from New Jersey to Martha’s Vineyard when the plane he was flying crashed into the sea. Two hours before his flight, Kennedy had gotten a weather forecast from the Internet, but it offered no caution that the haze that hung over his route could obscure a pilot’s vision of the horizon. The forecast called for good visual flying conditions with visibility of six to eight miles. It is likely that Kennedy became disoriented as he flew over the ocean on a nearly moonless night in the thick haze. Kennedy’s Piper Saratoga made a series of meandering turns as it tried to approach the airport at Martha’s Vineyard. At 9.41 p.m. it crashed into the Atlantic Ocean. The NTSB report later revealed that the wreckage of Kennedy’s single-engine showed no evidence of fire, no in-flight breakup, and no engine or other mechanical problems. Their conclusion? Pilot error.

In these days of postmodern uncertainty and pragmatic direction setting, biblical leaders who lead based on emotion, business trends, or cultural reference points are in danger. It is far better to ‘fly under the hood’ of biblical authority and trust the instruments than to enter the death spiral of one’s feelings or experience. Biblical leadership begins with a commitment to biblical authority.²

The challenge of life can leave us feeling out of control and disorientated. The challenges of life can clog up the stream. To keep the stream clear we have to fly under the hood. We have to trust the instruments and not trust our own feelings, emotions or perspective. What we believe about God is vital when

² Bredfelt, G. “Great Leader, Great Teacher,” Moody Publishers 2006 pages 85/86

we find ourselves flying under the hood. When the fog of life closes in around us, when life's circumstances leave us disorientated and helpless, we need to be able to trust the instruments. We need to be able to trust ourselves to God.

God holds the bigger and better story. God is sovereign. We are not God, we are not sovereign, we are mostly not in control. What we believe about God is vital. Paul invites us to "Rejoice in the Lord!" Mostly, when we want to overcome our anxiety, our worry, our concerns, we want to take control of the situation. Taking control makes us feel better. We want certainty. Mostly though, control eludes us, because, in truth, control is not ours to take.

Here's the truth: we can't run the world or control it, but we can entrust it to God. Paul trusted himself and his circumstances to God. He writes from a Roman prison, facing a possible death sentence, but he writes this:

¹² Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. (Philippians 1 v 12-13)

He goes on to say this:

¹⁵ It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶ The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸ But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. (Philippians 1 v 15-18)

Paul could fly under the hood. Why? Because he trusted the world to an all-powerful, all good God. What you believe about God is vital.

I am fascinated by the story of Job. If anyone knew and understood the trauma and the tragedy of life, Job did. He lost everything, except his life and his wife. His wife suggested he should curse God for treating him this way. Job endured suffering on a deep and profound level.

Some of us know what that's like, don't we?

The prevailing wisdom of the day was that if you suffer, you must have sinned. Job's friends repeatedly told him so. Job wrestled with this but could see not

truth in it. Job cried out, but God remained silent. When, finally, God does enter the conversation, what he says is extraordinary.

He gives no answers to Job's questions. What he does is to give Job a glimpse of who he is, who it is who holds Job. I choose to read God's response as a gentle, loving rebuke from a doting father to a struggling child. In his love, God takes Job on a tour of the universe to show him the kind of God he is. He starts in chapter 38 v 4 with how the universe began. "Job" he asks excitedly, "What do you know about that?" "Fantastic, isn't it?" He points out the angels were so impressed with God's creation they all shouted for joy. All the stars sang together. In the rest of chapter 38 God reveals to Job his wonderful creativity in all he has made. At the same time and with great love, God is showing Job just how impossible it is for him, a finite human being, to grasp the complexity of the universe.

In chapter 39 God shows Job how much he delights in his creation, and gives him an insight into the love that is at the centre of the universe. God shows Job the ostrich and other animals he has made. These animals have no strategic value to God – they offer him nothing. He tells Job the ostrich is, in fact, particularly stupid... it lays her eggs where they can easily be crushed! But God delights in his creation because that's the kind of person he is: they bring him great joy! Why would God create a world like this?

One commentator writes: Because God loves pizzazz, because he revels in the beauty and delight and joy of the least strategic creature that will never do him any good. He just loves to give.

What is revealed to Job on his tour of the universe is a God who is endlessly good, uncontrollably generous and irrationally loving. God has no need or desire to defend himself before Job, because as he shows Job around the universe his nature simply flows out and floods over Job. Ultimately Job's response to God is to say - God is enough!

What do you believe about God, friends?

What you believe about God is vital for how you will be able to navigate your way through life. Paul invites us, urges us, to entrust ourselves to the sovereignty of God: "Rejoice in the Lord, always!" That's what he did. The truth that Paul is inviting us to, is that the more we are able to say that God is enough, the less hold anxiety can have over us. Maybe, in a different way of

saying it, Paul is inviting us to know that to rejoice in the Lord always, helps to keep the stream un-clogged and the water fresh.

There is a film called 'The Bear' about a tiny bear cub whose mother dies. It's chances of survival are nil, but the unexpected happens – it is adopted by an enormous Kodiak bear. The giant bear is always watching over the cub – they do everything together. The Kodiak protects the young cub and teaches him how to be a bear. It looks like the cub's future is assured.

One day they get separated and the cub cannot see his father anywhere. A mountain lion sees his opportunity; a young unprotected cub. The mountain lion is about to spring when the cub does what he has seen his father do, he rears up on his hind legs and growls, but his attempt to scare the mountain lion is feeble. Everyone watching knows the cub will not survive the attack.

The camera focuses on the face of the mountain lion, whose face suddenly shows a look of intense fear. It pauses, and then unexpectedly slinks away. The cub wonders if his growl really did work. But as the camera pans back, we see what the bear did not know and could not see. Behind the cub is the great Kodiak, standing on his hind legs, his massive body posed to save his son. In truth, the little cub had nothing to worry about because even though he could not see him or hear him, his father was there all the time.

His father could be trusted, even when he seemed absent. What you believe about God is vital. Paul invites us to rejoice in the Lord, always. Again, he says Rejoice! Because God has it!