

September 17, 2006

## **Burdens**

### *Psalm 121*

You only have to drive down any street in Birmingham to realize how much of life parallels a Birmingham Street. A part of the road is resurfaced and the ride is smooth and then you come to the potholes which I call street acne. At best the ride is one of ups and downs, shake, rattle as you roll. These potholes, or burdens, are a part of every life. We cannot escape burdens that we encounter along the way. Some of the burdens we create for ourselves, some come from the actions of others, and some we can't explain. Burdens are a part of our humanity.

The ancients came up with the parable of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The story holds that the burdens we encounter are the results of our humanity overcoming our spirituality.

Last week we read of Jesus walking on the water, or if you will, walking above the burdens that seek to destroy the more

abundant life. In the details of this event we see Jesus showing us that there is within us a spirituality that enables us to rise above the burdens of our humanity. If that be so one of the secrets to the more abundant life is to develop a spiritual strength. Strength being a contrast to the fear that caused Peter to sink.

In Psalm 121 we read of a pilgrim's journey from a far place in Palestine to Jerusalem. A journey that the pilgrim equates to life's journey.

### **Psalm 121**

- 1** *I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from?*
- 2** *My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.*
- 3** *He will not let your foot slip – he who watches over you will not slumber;*
- 4** *indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*
- 5** *The Lord watches over you – the Lord is your shade at your right hand;*
- 6** *the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.*
- 7** *The Lord will keep you from all harm – he will watch over your life;*
- 8** *the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.*

(NIV)

I am not so sure that we spend enough time drawing from the spiritual strength that we find in that collection of spiritual wisdom that make up the collective writings designated as Psalms. In the face of death we are quick to turn to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm for comfort. But for the most part we tend to skip over these spiritual gems.

Here is a man journeying across Palestine. This was before there were Roman roads that made travel between some places easier and safer than our traveler found. Our traveler had no map, had no compass. He gathered his directions from the sight of the hilltops that dotted the landscape. Hilltop after hilltop guided this pilgrim through the valleys to his destination.

At times his journey would carry him over the hills by way of a narrow ledge. One false step and his journey was over.

If the terrain was not enough he had to confront the demons of the day. There was a belief that there was a demon in the sun that smote people. We might call it sunstroke but to this ancient traveler it was the work of a demon. There was the demon in

the moon. We talk of a person being moon-struck so maybe this idea of demons hasn't entirely left our culture.

The sun demon by day, the moon demon by night. Out there all alone this traveler was surrounded by evil. All alone with evil.

Robbers hid in the caves to prey on travelers that came their way. If traveling in a group they would post one of their number upon a hill as a sentry or lookout to warn of danger. This fellow's job was to stay awake and watch in order that the group would not be caught off guard.

With an amazing insight this pilgrim saw in his travels through Palestine a picture of man's travels through life. To one journeying through life the Psalmist says, *"Keep an upward look of one's soul for in that upward look we find direction, safety and the assurance that we will arrive safely at our destination."*

We need to keep hills before us when we hit the potholes of life's journey. One of the certainties of life is change. None

of us knows how our life may change before this day is done. Our hopes may come crashing about us; disease may tear through our body; the circle of our home and friendships may be broken by death.

When we hit the potholes we may be jarred, a tire may bust, or we may end up with a broken axle and a trip to the repair shop. Whatever, when our world crashes all we will see is the little world around us. It is here we need to look unto the hills and know there is a strength we can call on and that life and the world and God is greater than the potholes. The broken life can either do us in or we can rise above it and put the pieces back together.

In the last analysis life is a lonely, personal and individual journey. Oh we try to crowd it out as we surround ourselves with radio, TV and the voice of friends. Sounds. But when we get right down to it there is that inner sanctum where we face the reality of the living of our life. A place where distracting sounds cannot penetrate. When we tremble from the unknown,

the unpredictable, we turn to that likeness of our Creator that is a part of the inner us. A part that does not slumber and which will give us the strength to rise above the waves so that we are not overwhelmed.

As we journey through this imperfect world there is an evil that surrounds us. There is no escape from this evil that takes so many forms. To a life to be lived in this valley of evil comes the word of the one who will keep and sustain us and preserve our soul. A word symbolized by the peaks that rise above us.

I am convinced that so much of the evil we face comes out of the moral crisis that has exploded in our society. We seem to have lost the sense of direction that comes from the hills. We have grown content to wander aimlessly, head down through the valleys. We are content to live in a world where there are no high mountain peaks of immovable and eternal truths and righteousness. We are content to view truth and righteousness and law as relative things. Sad to say but ethics, law and morals are no longer absolute in the minds of our society. They are

relative depending upon the circumstances, the time, the persons and the ends that the person or groups want to accomplish.

A short time back a group of us were discussing a breach of morality. One of the younger members of the group explained, *“You don’t understand, times have changed.”* A simple expression of the philosophy that is so much a part of our society. The philosophy that holds that there is no basis for absolute law, truth, morals, ethics and righteousness. Our society as a whole may not understand this but it accepts it. A substantial part of our society indulges in the view that there are no absolute moral standards that one has to meet. It all boils down to a people living with a philosophy that if the bar is too high we just lower it.

Now it is one thing to talk about this evil that plagues us, it is another thing to do something about it. But do we must. Our Christian heritage requires action. We have to rise above the evil and in so doing help to pull the mores of our society to the absolutes laid down by Christ.

We talked about Christ feeding the 5,000 which gave rise to the multiplication of the little. Just as an aggregate of a little savings of many little people put together make a great economic system so the little spiritual resources which ordinary people like ourselves invest in our society and in the lives of those with whom we come in contact will make for a better community and a better society. It is important to our world, our country and our society that what is happening inside of us can overcome what is happening outside of us.

Those who by their lives have been lifted above the evil that surrounds us leave us some exercises by which we too can be an inspiration to others. For these exercises to be of any value we have to desire to develop the spiritual strength that will allow us to rise above the evil that seeks to engulf us. Spiritual fitness does not come to us as a gift. It comes to us because we want it to. As St. Paul says we must take the time and trouble to become spiritually fit. This means exercise.

Heading the list of the exercise to make us spiritually fit so



that we can rise above the potholes of life is to read the Bible for its spiritual message. The spiritual message that comes to us out of the Bible is what we are after, not history, not literature. The spiritual message is concerned with teaching us how to live. Look at what Christ does as an example for the living of our life. Listen to what Christ says as he gives us direction to the more abundant life.

Coupled with reading the Bible for its spiritual message is corporate worship and the fellowship that comes within the church. One of the reasons we find so many denominations within the Protestant church is the desire of like minds to get together in fellowship and worship.

Corporate worship is of little value if we attend the service upset at the church, upset at its programs, upset at the preacher or other members. To overcome these problems we start the service with music that has calmed Christians over the years. The music and the silence that precedes the pastoral prayer lifts our spirit that our hearts may be joined as one as we hear the

Word of God and its interpretation from the pulpit.

Next in line of our spiritual discipline is to cherish high thoughts and noble emotions. *“Whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things of good report, if there be any virtue, if there be any praise, think on these things.”*

If we seek good we will find it. If we seek the morbid and the ugly we will find it. Keep the eye and the mind on the mountain top.

Listen to that inner voice and put into practice the best we know. As we seek to rise above our burdens we need to help others do the same. A word of encouragement, a voiced concern, a helping hand will do wonders, not just to the recipient but to he who gives. Every time we obey the high impulse that rises within us we get a surge of spiritual vigor.

Last but not all, keep the lines of communication open. Make time for communication between one’s own heart and the reality of God. Call it prayer, call it a conference, call it a walk with the Creator, our personality needs to be in touch with the

personality that is God.

We can rise above our burdens and our limitations and walk on the water. To do so we are called upon to raise our aspirations from the potholes to the mountain peaks for it is in those mountain peaks that we find our strength.

### ***Pastor's Message***

*It has been truthfully said that the penalty for ignorance of history is to have to repeat it. While the author of this saying was speaking of political history, the principle applies to the living of everyday life.*

*The individual who makes no investigations as to what courses of action make for inward peace and outward success is almost universally doomed to mediocrity and failure and for the most part to personal misery.*

*Even the most casual and superficial study of the course of human lives both in the past and in the present demonstrates the superiority of virtuous conduct over evil ways and the excellence of following wisdom over the persistence in folly. The virtues of integrity, truthfulness, faithfulness, generosity and so on do pay the dividends and produce the rewards of inward peace and if practically applied, of outward success in human life.*

*The greatest service of an intelligent religion is to hold up to a man those courses of action which will produce the fullest human life possible and to warn him of those ways of living that in the long run lead to misery and disaster.*

*The individual human life span is too short for each man to experiment with ways of living for himself. The wise man avails himself of the experiences of mankind as recorded in the lives of those who have lived in the past and follow the guide lines of intelligent and practical religion.*

#### **PRAYER**

*O God, give me the wisdom and the good sense to acquaint myself with the evidence which human experience in the past reveals as to what is good and evil in living; and above all may I heed the counsels of intelligent religion. Amen.*

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