

“Holding on ...”
to the word of life ...

October 7, 2007

Text: Psalm 37:1-9, Philippians 2:12-18

I.

The Apostle Paul wrote his inspiring letter to the **Philippians** when he was in prison, probably in Ephesus. I’ve always been curious about this.

We always think of **Philippians** as his most positive, uplifting letter. It overflows with a spirit of rejoicing and celebration. Throughout, Paul exudes a notably *Christ-centered* consciousness.

And for Paul, this *Christ consciousness* evokes feelings of *suffering love* ...of personal sacrifice.

It’s important to know this about Paul because this is his goal. He’s sort of like **Mother Teresa** in this respect ... or perhaps we should say that Mother Teresa is like Paul. The point being: both want to *share in Christ’s sufferings*.

Check it out: *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.*

That’s heavy stuff, notably powerful and eye-opening. I’ve always wondered to what extent Paul’s mood and focus in his **Philippians’** letter are because he’s in prison. In other words, did his prison experience evoke this sort of deeply reflective response in him?

To some extent, it probably did!

II.

In prison, in relative solitude, a person has time to think ... and to remember. In fact, perhaps there is too much time. But, time, nonetheless.

And on top of this, Paul is always trying to make sense of the *mystery* and the *passion* of his conversion. More than fifteen years had passed. And he’s had time, now, to sort things out ... the meaning of it all ... the conviction in his heart ... and the riveting sense of *life-purpose*.

Remember—ACTS 9—on the Damascus Road ... on his way to check out the synagogues of Damascus and to bring back to Jerusalem, by force, any new Christians—Jews who had become believers in Jesus, in *the way*. Before all of this, you may recall,

Paul had been a zealous persecutor of Christians.

But now, on the Damascus Road, suddenly a *light* from somewhere flashes all about him (Acts says it was *from heaven*) ... and Paul falls to the ground ... and a voice sounds out: ***Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?***

And after asking, ***Who are you, Lord, who are you?*** the reply came back, that would haunt Paul for the rest of his days: **I am JESUS whom you are persecuting.**

Whoa! Those words must have rung in Paul's ear for what seemed like an eternity.

- And in a moment, Paul's whole life was turned around.
- And although Paul never knew Jesus in the flesh, this powerful, life-changing event stuck with Paul and gave him this incredible *Christ-like* consciousness.
- It gave him also this deep-seeded passion to want to share with Christ in his sufferings.

III.

And so Paul's in prison ... and all this is coming alive in his spirit ... the meanings, the *life-purpose*. And he's feeling this closeness to God and to Christ ... and he wants to somehow share it all with the new Christians in the new church start in Philippi.

These early Christians had lots to contend with in the social/ religious world of the first century. To begin with, pagan influences were everywhere ... along with any number of cultic traditions and practices. And there were all kinds of concerns and questions about *personal morality*.

The Philippian Church has been good to Paul. He's had a special relationship with them from the start. And he wants to say whatever he can to support them in the challenges of their faith journey.

Hey, life is hard ... as so many of us know. Certainly, Paul knows. And amidst the many challenges and temptations, fervently, he wants the **Philippians** to stay the course ... to **hold on ... Hold fast to the WORD of life**, he tells them. That's the key.

Holding on ... to the WORD of life!

IV.

And that's the word for us this morning. ***Hold on ...take a deep breath. Remember who you are; stay close to God in all things ... trust in the Lord ... hold fast to the WORD of life.***

It's not always easy, as we know. All the time, stuff is happening.

1. Things we don't expect or anticipate.
2. Things with our health ... with our career, with our job ...
3. Things with our family.

Isn't it both curious and alarming to note how sometimes **those who ought to love us most** give us the most grief? A parent ... a child ... a friend; sometimes even a spouse.

All about us, it seems, there is *dysfunction* to deal with.

1. A parent, sadly unable to see the BIG PICTURE ... the very real needs of the individual family members ... and acting in pathetically *self-absorbed* ways towards the children or grandchildren.
2. An employee at work, always looking out for number ONE ... gossiping, scheming, manipulating ... and more than anything, acting small and petty.
3. An adult sibling, refusing to grow up ... never doing their share in caring for the larger family ... totally self-centered ... with one lame excuse and justification after another.

It's tough ... and in the midst of all of this, we're trying to be Christian; trying to be a good person. We're trying to be kind, generous and compassionate. We're trying to honor our commitments, be a big person with a loving spirit. It's not easy.

V.

And Paul's words sound out for us: **hold fast to the WORD of life**. Again, remember who you are: You're a child of God ... and you're a Christian.

1. As a child of God, we are loved, valued and forgiven, more than we'll ever know.
2. As a Christian, we are part of the *new creation* God gives us in Christ. This *new creation* is transformed by LOVE, by the **sacrificial love** of the living Christ. This is his greatest gift to us—his cross and the sacrificial love of the ONE in whom God was and is so abundantly alive.
3. In this *new creation*, the **Word of life** is alive in us, making us shining lights in the world ... in the midst of whatever chaos or dysfunction.
4. *You are the light of the world*, says Jesus. *Let your light shine before others so they will see the good that you do and give glory to God* (Matthew 5:5:14,16).

In other words, be kind and generous and compassionate; be fair and just and firm ... always keeping the larger picture in mind.

At the end of the day, friends, we can only do what we can do. Always, there comes a point where we have to let go ... and trust the Spirit ... and simply hope for the best.

And sometimes, therefore, what ***holding fast to the WORD of life*** asks us to do is to *be patient*. ***Be still before the Lord***, says the Psalmist ... ***and wait patiently for him***.

- ... and don't fret over this or that ... over all the silliness and nonsense that come our way. Turn away from it ... let it go its own way ... all the little things that stress us out; don't over-react.
- When we're *alive to the Word of life* that is in us, our whole world is dominated by LOVE. And out of the love flows patience, kindness, and compassion.

VI.

Holding on to the WORD of life is to live our lives, therefore, with expectation ... expecting the love that God shines in and through us to make a difference—in our personal lives ... in the lives of others ... and in the world around us.

Paul could have been discouraged and disheartened in prison. He could have been anything but *alive in the Spirit* and effusing with joy.

But the ***WORD of life***—this *Christ consciousness*—was in him. He wants that for us, too ... the *Christ consciousness*. It's about LOVE ... about seeing the BIG PICTURE. It's about drawing people into the circle, into the aura, into the life of the Spirit.

So that, along with Paul, we, too, can *rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice ... and the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus* (Philippians 4:4,7).

All praise be unto God. Amen.

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