

Sunday, May 24, 2020

Real, Practical Life Strategy

1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.

Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.

And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

What's your strategy for life, and what's your plan for getting through this time of pandemic? Did I lose you already, and have you heard a few too many pep-talks about life strategies? Please bear with me!

Our culture believes very much in strategies and plans, and the self-help book shelves have long been full of volumes with titles like "Strategy for Living," and "Planning for Life." From year to year the themes take on a slightly new angle. Folks have been trying to sell us on "life management," "life coaching," and "time management," and there shall continue to be varied new flavors of this familiar dish. In all fairness it must be confessed that these books do offer a few good insights, but in time they only seem to satisfy the compulsive planners of this world who cannot drag themselves away from the drawing board. These strategists often try to plan out every detail of life and exalt the practice of planning to the status of a cure-all. I think of the financial planners who so stress the value of establishing a budget that they are blind to the troubles of one who simply does not earn enough money on which to live no matter how they

draw a budget. Their zealous promotion of a plan may succeed only in adding guilt to those in genuine financial need.

Many of you have heard enough of strategies and plans taught by smug know-it-alls, and are done listening to anything more on the topic. I understand your frustration, but I am going to beg your forbearance for just a little while. Today's Epistle lesson is from the closing chapters of 1 Peter and it contains some of the very best life strategy to be found anywhere. Peter holds forth wise insight on meeting life's troubles and making a plan to find our way through life's maze. His counsel is powerful, realistic and life-saving, and has seen me through many dark times. These are days which call for a response – for a plan. Let's consider the Apostle's advice.

Peter begins by urging us to keep a **Perspective**. *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.* Life is a lot easier to manage when we begin with a realistic understanding of what it truly involves. Life is hard and we must not forget this. One might imagine that the early believers were initially shocked at meeting persecution and rejection from the world around them. When they came to know Christ, they were filled with joy, peace and hope as they had come to know the gentle Savior of the world. Why would anyone be against a person having such peace and joy? These early believers were surprised to find that not all shared their joy, and Peter had to break the bad news to them – being a friend of Christ may make you an enemy to the world. Don't be surprised. As modern westerners we live in a world of comfort, wealth and technological solutions to seemingly everything, and these blessings so easily fool us into thinking that life should be easy. We too need to hear Peter's reminder: life is hard so don't be surprised.

A realistic look at this world saves us from a lot of hurts and surprises down the road. We look at our present pandemic as a unique struggle, but as we consider history we see differently. We may remember our grandparents' reports of the Spanish flu, and what reports those were! We recall stories of tuberculosis and polio. In recent years there were threats of SARS, Avian flu, Ebola and other frightening diseases. Those were problems for some other part of the world and not us. Now we have a little more perspective on the matter! Just as we tell our children life is tough, let us be sure to listen to our own advice.

Having served this bitter pill, Peter offers a response. *Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God.* This may sound like a second bitter pill, but actually humility can be a tremendous relief. A few years ago, there was a contemporary Christian song which loudly proclaimed, "God is God, and I am not!" Wonderful advice, and real relief to those who take it to heart. I am not up to bearing the burdens of the world and neither are you. Isn't that a relief? With this additional perspective on the situation we can find rescue as we turn to the mighty God who can bear the burdens of the world.

Peter invites us to trust in God. He calls us to rejoice in our sufferings. Why? Because our suffering draws us close to Christ who came to earth from heaven and entered into our sufferings. We are invited to *cast all our anxiety on him, because he cares for you*. Some people live like Atlas the Greek god, feeling it their responsibility to take every trouble around them upon their weary shoulders. God's plan is the opposite. Hand your troubles over to me, says our God. And how do we know God truly cares? The cross of Christ is the proof.

Peter wants us to keep a sane and sober perspective on the world so that we not be thrown into a tizzy when life seems to come apart. This is our first step. Now we move into the heart of our life strategizing. Be **Perceptive** and have a **Plan!** Verse 8 offers the greatest insight of the passage. *Discipline yourselves, keep alert*. We are to be disciplined and alert, that is, controlled and perceptive, as we enter into life's battle. Easier said than done, as battle causes the juices to flow and energy and reflex may overcome us. But Peter urges us to remain calm and alert, and the illustration which he offers gives compelling reason. *Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour*. Let's spend a moment in Peter's picture. Suppose we live in a small village in the wild which has a lion in the area. Add to this that the lion is hungry and likes to eat people. What are we to do? Panic and hysteria might come naturally, and though they would be a strong temptation, we also know that they are self-defeating strategies! We dare not panic, for we know that this will spell our doom. So, what shall we do?

We begin by studying the lion. Where is the lion? Where and when does he sleep? Does he have any familiar paths and routines? Have any been harmed or killed by this lion? How, exactly, did that happen? This study may involve some dangerous reconnaissance, but perhaps this will not be as dangerous as we think. Peter speaks of a *roaring* lion, and such a voice travels. The lion may not be as difficult to study as we had first believed. Having learned the habits and ways of the lion, we could make a plan to set guards who could give quick warning to others. We could also study and devise the most effective ways to fight off a lion. Life would not be easy with a lion in the neighborhood and safety would require real effort and planning, but this may be a problem which can be effectively managed. Have I taken Peter's illustration a little too seriously? I think not. This is exactly the kinds of strategies which we need to be developing against our spiritual enemy.

The question is, how is the devil at work in our lives? What is his plan? One question that we all need to be asking ourselves is this: If the devil was to de-rail my life with Christ, how would he do it? What are the weak spots in my spiritual life which the enemy would exploit to my destruction? As you consider the possible temptations which the devil may send, don't think only of the grand and dramatic ones. Sure, many people's lives have been destroyed by alcohol, riches and dancing girls, but for every one of those stories there are a thousand incidents of people whose walk with Christ has been harmed severely by worry, cynicism, lax habits of worship and devotion, etc.

What might be your weak spots? Do you work too much? Is your temper a concern? How has your walk with Christ been harmed or hindered in the past? On a positive note, consider the times that you have kept your faith strong and your life on track. How did you do it, and how can you keep that strength going?

Once we know these weaknesses and some of our strengths, we are ready to plan, and these plans are not necessarily complicated. Often, we are aware of friends and associates who bring out the worst in us. We might want to spend less time with them or find a new way of going about our friendship. Are you becoming a TV addict? You could try dropping that fancy cable package, or even giving up television. If you are given to depression or anxiety, carefully study the signs that these afflictions are gaining a hold on you, and respond before they become worse. Be perceptive. Study the enemy, study your own life, and make a plan.

Perhaps you feel a little insulted by this advice as it seems like simple common sense. It *is* common sense, and no insult is intended. We have all been in the habit of studying our own lives, whether it be from a perspective of our professional lives, our health and fitness, or our relationships. We must be especially careful to study our own *spiritual* lives, for this is a matter of eternal importance. It is so important that we have a plan. If you are involved with A.A. or a Twelve-Step group you are very familiar with all that I have been saying, as this is the essence of living the life of recovery. These groups also remind us of the importance of living out our faith in a fellowship as we were meant to support and guide one another. This is meant to be a group effort!

A successful strategy for living requires *perspective*, *perceptiveness* and *planning*, but this is not the end of the story. It is tempting to think that a proper strategy solves everything, and if a problem persists one might quickly assume that the plan is badly flawed. The third and final phase of the plan is usually the toughest. This final phase is that of **Perseverance**. Having urged us to study the lion's behaviors and respond accordingly, Peter immediately continues with this advice: *Resist him, steadfast in your faith*. Resist! This sounds like a battle, and it is. One might, for instance, have worked out a wonderful strategy to keep a hot temper in check. One can learn to avoid certain situations, to exit before feelings boil, to coach oneself through difficult conversations, and to use handy phrases. All these tactics may prove helpful, but there will come a time when one simply has to resist the urge to explode. There will be times when we just have to white-knuckle it for a while and hang on for dear life. Resist!

Let's look again at our lion-plagued village. For a moment we may delight in the nifty plan which we have devised to resist this growling beast. We may even feel giddy for a moment as we gloat over our brilliant scheme to keep the killer feline at bay. But ultimately, we have to enact the plan and stick to it. Some might resist doing their turn at guard duty, or fall asleep while on their post. Some might be slow to rally when the alarm is sounded, or lose their nerve in dangerous situations. This does not mean that

the plan is a bad one. What it means is that the plan requires real work. Perseverance is required. If the plan continues to prove too difficult, it probably does need revisited, but let us not be quick to re-strategize when what we may really need is a little more stick-to-itiveness.

Finally, Peter reminds us that we are not alone in our struggle. *Know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.* We are not alone! The devil's favorite lie is to convince us that we are alone in a certain problem or pain, but this could not be farther from the truth. In this immediate trial of the pandemic I often remember the news reports from just months ago when I heard of lockdowns in China and other parts of the world as a result of the virus. It is with some embarrassment that I confess I gave little thought to the troubles of brothers and sisters around the world. Now I take great comfort in the knowledge that we are not alone in this struggle.

As the signs say, "we are in this together," so let us do all we can to remind each other of our fellowship of struggle. And as Christ's people let us be glad that a day of victory is in our future. *And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.*

Keep a **Perspective**, be **Perceptive** and make a **Plan**, and be sure to **Persevere**. This is sound counsel, and not from some smug know-it-all, but from a fellow combatant in the battle of faith. And though this strategy is not presented with the promise of a slick, easy victory, it does come with the bold assurance that in Christ we shall win.

* * * * *

Worship Aids

A Hymn:

Soldiers of Christ, Arise

*Soldiers of Christ arise and put your armor on,
Strong in the strength which God supplies through His eternal Son;
Strong in the Lord of hosts, and in His mighty power,
Who in the strength of Jesus trusts is more than conqueror.*

*Stand then in His great might, with all His strength endued,
And take, to arm you for the fight, the panoply of God;
From strength to strength go on, wrestle and fight and pray;
Tread all the powers of darkness down, and win the well-fought day.*

*Leave no unguarded place, no weakness of the soul;
Take every virtue, every grace, and fortify the whole.
That having all things done, and all your conflicts past,
Ye may overcome through Christ alone, and stand complete at last.*

—Charles Wesley

Confession & Assurance:

Dear Jesus, we hear the battle call to rejoice in our suffering, to be humble and to cast off our anxieties, to be alert and to resist evil. We confess that we feel too weak, wayward and frightened to fight in your army. Hear our confession, forgive us, and strengthen us for your service.

Righteous God, your mercy awaits us when we return to you in meekness and repentance. Cleanse us from selfishness and falseness, which separate us from your fellowship. Through your atoning love, heal the brokenness in our lives and in our world. With wholeness restored, help us to live for the coming of your Son, our Savior, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Hear the Good News. Peter the Apostle assures us that *after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.* By His atoning death and victorious Resurrection Christ has forgiven us, restored, supported, strengthened and established us. Let us believe this Good News, give thanks to God and live in peace.

Prayer:

O Lord our God, teach us, we beseech thee, to ask thee aright for the right things. Steer thou the vessel of our life towards thyself, thou tranquil haven of all storm-tossed souls. Show us the course wherein we should go. Renew a willing spirit within us. Let thy Spirit curb our waywardness and guide and enable us unto that which is our true good, to keep thy laws, and in all our works evermore to rejoice in thy glorious and gladdening presence. For thine is the glory and praise from all thy saints for ever and ever.

—Basil the Great, 330-379

Benediction:

May the cross of the Son of God, which is mightier than all the hosts of Satan and more glorious than all the hosts of heaven, abide with you in your going out and your coming in. By day and night, at morning and at evening, at all times and in all places may it protect and defend you. From the wrath of evildoers, from the assaults of evil spirits, from foes visible and invisible, from the snares of the devil, from all passions that beguile the soul and body: may it guard, protect and deliver you.

—Church of India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon. Book of Common Prayer