

## A Few Thoughts for the Hunkered-Down

Thursday, July 2, 2020

# *Rediscovering Dutch Stoicism*

*Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble? —Job 2:10*

*It was good for me to be afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.*

—Psalm 119:71

*Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. —James 1:2-4*

*What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. —Anonymous*

As the COVID disruption has worn on I have come to a new and deeper admiration of the stoic. I speak here of the stoic, not in the strictly philosophical sense of the Greek stoic philosophers, but in the general sense of those who face life's trials with toughness and little outward emotion. While stoics can be found among many different groups and ethnicities, I am particularly impressed by the old Pennsylvania Dutch variety which is common to our area. Theirs is an admirable endurance, and their lives echo the words of the long-suffering Job who saw both blessing and pain as from the hand of God, and believed that both were to be accepted obediently.

The stoic's life is not an easy one, for not only must they bear up quietly under troubles, but they have to put up with the whiners of the worlds who go on endlessly about their problems and the injustice of it all. In response to our very vocal world where every just cause and every unfairness is loudly protested with a bumper sticker, the stoic drives the vehicle with the solitary sticker bearing only two pointed words: "Just Suffer! "

We reflective types do not naturally appreciate the stoics as they appear to be so unthoughtful. To the ponderer and preacher there is always some reason or nuance behind the suffering at hand which deserves a fuller exploration, but the stoic is usually disinterested in that search. "Life happens," replies the stoic, "and we just have to deal with it." While the stoic may have settled the matter in their spirit and promptly began soldiering on through whatever dark passage, the reflective types feel a deep need to first understand what is going on. Studying the causes and dynamics of a crisis may not make it all go away, but it is comforting for many to feel they have a deeper grasp of the situation. They feel better equipped to pray and act in the face of painful times. It becomes very tempting to look down upon the stoic, whether consciously or unconsciously, until the ponderer reaches a certain point in

their journey. When the analyzers of the world have exhausted their various avenues of reflection and feel they have discovered the last nuance, they come to a painful realization. They finally see that there is little left to do but to hunker down and soldier their way through the troubles at hand! It is only then that many a ponderer comes to an appreciation of the no-nonsense stoic.

As the reflectors and thinkers of the world take a second look at the stoics, they may notice that these flinty faced soldiers are actually more thoughtful than first imagined. The stoic may be heard to say something like, "no pain, no gain," though this remark is usually brushed off as having little meaning. But properly understood, such sentiments may have plenty of meaning, which includes plenty of *biblical* meaning. Pain and struggle are often mentioned in the Scripture as experiences which strengthen our faith and deepen our character. Early in my walk with Christ, I came to appreciate Psalm 119:71 (printed above). While I may have resented the problems and struggles of my life, from early on I recognized that without those challenges I probably would not have developed a life of faith. James speaks of our life's various trials as something to be received joyfully as they produce perseverance and a strong Christian character. It is doubtful that I will ever come to fully embrace that verse in a heartfelt way, but James is certainly on to something.

As the present crisis and all its heartbreaking effects continue, I will continue to reflect. That's what preachers do, and the Bible is one big invitation to reflect and explore. It is also a way to deal with the many emotions and pains of the situation. But I will also tip my hat to the Christian stoics who show us how the battle is endured. We truly need each other, for there are many mysteries to be explored and injustices to be addressed, and we could all use a good lesson in toughness. Together as Christ's Church, let us soldier on!

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

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*O Lord God, when thou givest to thy servants to endeavor any great matter; grant us also to know that it is not the beginning but the continuing of the same until it is thoroughly finished which yieldeth the true glory. Through him who, for the finishing of thy work, laid down his life for us, our redeemer, Jesus Christ. —Source Unknown, based on saying of Sir Francis Drake, 1540-1596*