

I King Duncan

I don't know if any of you ever read the obituaries. My guess is that the older you are the more likely you are to let your eyes drift over to that section of the newspaper. As the comedian would say, "just to make certain your name's not printed there." Of course, some of our younger members are asking, "What's a newspaper?"

An interesting obituary appeared in the Chattanooga *Times-Free Press* recently (12/18/2019) that, in my estimation, was good for a chuckle or two. It was for a Katie McDonald, 80 years old. The obituary contained all kinds of praise for her virtues as a human being, but as you read down the page you are exposed to some of her eccentricities as well.

One paragraph reads like this: "She was preceded in death by the father of their four children, Charles Alan McDonald, whom she loved to her dying day, and her beloved family pets: Simon the Siamese cat; Peanut, the wiener dog; Sugar the howling dog; Daisy, the very special-extremely-important-stray dog; and most notably, Jack her darling mutt who lost his tail in an unfortunate accident, whereupon Mom saved the tail in the freezer ' . . . just in case . . .'" Then appears the words, "(go figure)."

Later in the obituary we read, "She left behind a load of stuff her family doesn't know what to do with." (There is a list of these miscellaneous items and then this notice: "Anyone interested in [having these items] please wait the appropriate amount of time to reach out. Tomorrow should be fine.")

After listing her church where friends would be received and a service would be held, there was this final notice: "Finally, the family asks that, in lieu of flowers, please write your Congressman and ask for the repeal of Daylight Savings Time. We think Mom would like it if we were all on the Lord's time."

I don't know about repealing Daylight Savings Time, but I found that to be quite a refreshing approach to the death of a loved one who evidently had a good life and a strong faith, who loved her family, her pets, and her God. That's the way a Christian's death should be greeted. There should be a celebration of a life well-lived and an anticipation of a life now lived in the presence of a loving God. That brings us to our topic for today. It's hope—Christian hope.

Years ago, in his book *Success through a Positive Mental Attitude*, business writer Napoleon Hill told about a successful cosmetic manufacturer—probably Charles Revson, the founder of the Revlon cosmetic company—who decided he would retire at the age of sixty-five. Each year thereafter, his friends and former business associates gave him a birthday party and tried to find out the secret of his success; in other words, the "secret" for his special cosmetic formula. But year after year he refused, good-naturedly, to reveal his secret.

"Maybe I will tell you next year," he would say.

This went on for ten years until the businessman celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday. As usual, his associates begged him to share the secret formula with them so they could continue the business after his death. Finally, he yielded to their insistence.

“In addition to the things which I use which are commonly known,” he said, “there is one secret ingredient that I package with every bottle.” By this time, everyone at the party was listening with rapt attention.

“What is it?” an anxious friend inquired. “Please, don’t keep us in suspense any longer.”

Revson replied: “I never told a woman that my product would make her beautiful, but I always gave her hope.”

“Hope,” he said, “is the magic ingredient.” (1)

Well, hope is the magic ingredient—whether in life or in death, in good times or times of sorrow. The magic ingredient is the assurance that regardless of how challenging today is, God is in charge and that, as St. Paul says in Romans 8:28, “all things work to the good for those who love Him.” That’s hope.

In today’s lesson, which is devoted to hope, St. Paul writes, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

Think about that for a moment. This is what hope is all about. It is the admission that the present times may not be perfect, in fact they may be heart-wrenching, but, if we trust in God, better days lie yet ahead. “Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

St. Paul knew that none of us gets through life without wrestling at some time or another with some daunting challenges. [Could someone give me an “Amen” to that?] At times, all of us will face difficult challenges.

During the Vietnam War, Admiral James Stockdale was the highest-ranking U.S. officer taken as a prisoner by the Vietnamese. For eight years James Stockdale was held hostage under horrific circumstances in a P.O.W. camp where he was tortured regularly. But he did not give in or give up. In fact, he was a remarkable inspiration to his fellow soldiers.

Jim Collins, author of the best-selling book, *Good to Great*, had the opportunity to spend some time with Stockdale. Collins writes, “What separates people, Stockdale taught me, is not the presence or absence of difficulty, but how they deal with the inevitable difficulties of life.”

Stockdale believed that if you retain faith that you will prevail in the end regardless of the difficulties—and at the same time confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be, you will be victorious.

Stockdale’s convictions were not based on blind optimism, he said. He was asked about prisoners who did not survive. He replied, “Oh, that’s easy, [these were] the optimists.

They were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. One by one," he said, "they died of a broken heart."  
(2)

James Stockdale did not die of a broken heart. In fact, in 1992, after the war he was Ross Perot's running mate in the race for President of the United States.

But notice Stockdale's emphasis: hope is not the same as blind optimism—the belief that somehow everything will somehow work out fine. Without God, nothing is certain to work out fine.

A good example of such persistence in the face of adverse circumstances is the early Christian community. They faced horrific circumstances at times, yet they never gave in to doubt and fear. They were certain that God was with them and that God would see them through. They embodied St. Paul's words—their "present sufferings were not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." How else could they keep going if they did not have that hope?

Years ago, a husband, wife, and their grown son emigrated from Sicily to southern Illinois. There both father and son found work in a coal mine. But then tragedy struck. There was an explosion in the mine. The father was killed, and the son was maimed.

While he was recovering in the hospital, the young man, along with his mother, came to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior. This had such a profound effect on them that they changed their surname. The name they chose for themselves was Sperondeo. In Italian that means, "My hope is in God." This phrase became the young man's inspiration to complete college and graduate study and become a college professor. His name was the motto of his life—Sperondeo—"My hope is in God." (3)

Where else is such hope to be found? Do you know any other place? Government? Education? Science? None of these can reach where you hurt during dark times. Only faith in God's promises can do that.

It's like a story that a Lutheran Pastor named Reuben Youngdahl tells. It is about a young man he met while visiting in Dublin, Ireland one summer. Youngdahl noticed this young man had on the desk in his study a plaque with two words on it. The words were "But God." Pastor Youngdahl was so impressed by this plaque that he had one made up just like it for his own desk.

Visitors to his office would ask him, "What do you mean by those two words— "But God"?"

He explained that in his hour of deepest need he had learned to say, "But God . . . will help." In a moment of utter despair, he could say, "But God . . . will give me hope." In a moment of loneliness, he could say, "But God . . . is with me." When he felt insignificant and unwanted, it would help to repeat, "But God . . . loves me."

“That always turned the scale from despair to hope, from defeat to victory, from sin to salvation,” he reported. “But God . . . but God . . . but God . . .” (4)

You see, that is much more than blind optimism that everything is simply going to work out all right. Such faith recognizes that life can often be hard—sometimes brutally hard—but if we maintain our faith, and if we will persist and not give up, God will come through for us.

As long as there is hope—Christian hope—life is worth living.

The late Emil Brunner once said, “What oxygen is for the lungs, such is hope for the meaning of human life.” And he was right. Really, a hope-filled life is the only life worth living.

Let me tell you about a young man who discovered the meaning of such hope. Some of you who are football fans may remember the name Russell Okung. Okung was chosen twice to play in the Pro Bowl while with the Seattle Seahawks. More recently he played with Denver and then with the Los Angeles Chargers. He is a man with strong convictions. While with the Seahawks he did an interview in which he shared his faith in Christ. Listen to his words:

“I grew up being extremely self-sufficient. My father passed away when I was a young child, making me the man of the household. Since then I’ve taken on that responsibility. As I grew up, I did a lot of things for myself and became really independent.

“[However], in college, a hurricane went through Houston and my mom and sister were at the house by themselves—I was off at school. It was a tough time. They called and said the house had flooded.

“They told me they would be all right, but I remember looking at myself and asking, ‘Why?’

“Why was this going on? Why did my father pass away when I was a child? Why did I feel this way?

“All of these ‘whys.’ In asking that, I found out some things were just out of my control; I couldn’t do everything on my own. I thought that there had to be something bigger to make sense of what was happening in my life.

“I remember sitting at chapel one day when God spoke to me.

“It’s crazy how God will come to you even in the most small, subtle ways — maybe even a whisper. He told me, ‘You don’t have to do this alone. You’re not by yourself.’

“At that moment, I realized God had always been there—since I was a very small child even. Even though I thought I was doing things on my own, I couldn’t have done anything without Him.

“When that happened, I knew God could only be my present hope. If I truly believed in Him, everything would take care of itself.

“And it did.

“All of a sudden, I noticed things were changing. I felt more of a peace within me and a peace about my situations. I learned and trusted God with everything I had and decided to give it all to Him.” (5)

Russell Okung, a big, tough former professional football player, was describing the magic ingredient in his life—hope, Christian hope—the belief that we may go through some rough times that we may not understand, but if we trust God and persist in our faith in Him, He will always come through. We are not alone.

St. Paul writes, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” Do you have that kind of confidence in God? It truly is the magic ingredient that takes life to a whole new level.

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1. Napoleon Hill, *Success Through A Positive Mental Attitude*, (NJ: Prentice-Hall Publishers, 1960), pp. 102-103. Cited in J. B. Fowler, Jr., *Illustrating Great Words Of The New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991).

2. *Jim Collins, Good to Great* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001), 85. Cited in Leonard Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010).

3. John A. Witmer in Roy B. Zuck, *Devotions for Kindred Spirits* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), p. 259.

4. Contributed. Source: “Visiting Hours Are Over,” by C. Thomas Hilton, *The Clergy Journal*, May/June 1994, p. 17.

5. January 28, 2015, *3 Minute Read*, “Seahawks’ Okung Describes His Faith Story,” <https://www.cru.org/us/en/how-to-know-god/my-story-a-life-changed/seahawks-okung-describes-his-faith-story.html>.

II

Fr Desiano

We hear a lot about identity. How we know ourselves. It should be pretty simple on one level: our gender, age, family background, careers, etc. But identity seems much more a thing of choice today at least in some respects, not what I belong to but who I choose to be.

And often identity gets easier when we have a clear enemy. It was easier to see ourselves as Catholics when, before the second Vatican Council, we thought everyone else was going to hell. And it was easier to wave the American flag when we could

shout “Community” and threaten war. Certainly in sports, the games we enjoy the most are the ones with our rivals, the team we always boo.

But our Gospel today has some important cautions. It begins by setting things up the way you and I typically do it: here’s the good and then the bad. The wheat and the weeds. We decide, of course, who we think is good or bad and then we name them the enemy or opposition. “Let’s get rid of the weeds,” we shout..

As the parable gets going however, the Master has to cool his servants down. They want to pull out all of the weeds right away, to make the field perfect again. But the Master says doing that may be way too destructive. Instead of using your might to settle scores and prove you are correct, how about being patient, knowing God will ultimately bring about the right.

I do not think that this is a parable to tell us to do nothing, or not to strive to make things better. But it is a parable to warn us about taking into our own hands the fundamental judgment that belongs to God. And it is a parable to urge us to treat each other with gentleness. That we sometimes think having a weapon and settling scores is the best or only approach when, in fact, we are always called to love.

The short passage we have from St. Paul today is very important because it reinforces this spiritual vision. Paul makes two points. One is that we are often so conflicted and confused we don’t know what to pray for. How many people have felt this when they see the approaching death, and great suffering, of someone we love? “What do I pray for?” Paul says to open our hearts and let the Spirit speak from deep inside of us. Just like it takes a while for crops to grow, it may also take a while for us to resolve difficult situations and feelings in our lives.

Secondly Paul talks about God scrutinizing our hearts. Yes, we do have to think that God’s Spirit is seeing us with a clarity that we barely have about ourselves. And God sees the intentions of others with a clarity that we can never have. Who I truly am is who I am before God.

Our basic identity comes from God, how God sees us, and how God leads us on unique paths through the Holy Spirit. We sometimes think that this involves opposition and conflict. Yet the basic conflict is not outside ourselves but within our hearts, from the conflict we foster inside us. Our God wins not by brutal power but by loving patience. When we share his love and patience, it is then we are closest to God.