

## DCCCP 8/14/22 Faith and the Race Set Before Us

One of the great mysteries of our lives comes from the constant dialogue running through our heads that sounds like this: “What am I going to do about this? What am I going to do now? What am I supposed to do in my life – now?”

Just waking up in the morning I’m faced with the mundane to the enormous, from the trivial to the critical and I’m standing at the front of all of it wondering what to do next.

My eggplant didn’t come in very well this year – what should I do about that?

I’m invited to a party for a friend but I really can’t afford the time and I don’t want to go, but I want to support my friend. What should I do?

I have this pain I need to see a doctor about but the next appointment is 3 months away. Should I hunt for another doctor?

There’s a great need I could help with but it would be really hard to do it and very disruptive to my family. What should I do?

There are huge problems in the world and I have time but I’m not really good at solving any of them. What could I do that would make a difference?

What am I supposed to do in my life – now?

Psalm 80 tells us of a people, a people favored by God, the Hebrew nation, who wrote about their experiences trusting in God and claiming victory from where they wrote. They wrote about their history after having already gotten to where they were headed. Choices had been made by them, trusting in God, and they were in a pretty good place in life. They were blessed. But, it also writes of this same people, seemingly in real time, asking God to be with them again after they had failed over and over to do what was "right" in the Lord’s eyes. Their world seemed to be crumbling around them.

In this sermon, I’m going to look at 2 enormous, complex issues in the world today from the light of people of faith, running the race of life. For the first -

I heard a story this week on the radio as I went about my day-to-day business just like I do most days. The story talked about rising temperatures in the Arctic, an effect of global warming that I find myself day by day thinking on but doing nothing about. The problems there seem critical and enormous but I feel pretty incapable of helping.

But it also seems to me that God has promised to be with me, that Jesus has promised to never leave nor forsake me in whatever path I take in life, as long as

my life is held within God’s blessings. With this truth in mind, how can I help my world?

You might have heard in the past couple of years that the Arctic is warming 2x faster than the rest of the earth and that this is a real concern for the world. Technically, the causes of heating start with global warming causing melting up there. As the temperature rises in the Arctic, white arctic snow melt results in darker ice being exposed and water vapor collecting as low clouds. The darker ice absorbs more of the sun’s heat and the clouds reflect the heat back to the ground –causing more temperature rise and more melting. It’s a lot more complex than that but suffice it to say that the 2x faster temperature rise figure is old-school. By late last year, researchers were estimating that the Arctic region is actually warming more than four times faster than the rest of Earth, with huge consequences for the whole planet.<sup>1</sup>

Humanity is funny, and sometimes a little psychotic:

When life gets even a little bit good, we completely forget that this life is a blessing from God.

When life gets hard, we forge our own path and completely forget to pray and seek God’s help.

When life gets too hard, well then, we finally start to pray, fervently, and eventually even start to strike bargains with God.

As I mentioned, Psalm 80 was written after the victory, by the victors, after the battles are won and the promised land has been taken over and peace is in the land. The nation is in a good place. This is verses 8-9. A thank you for success and blessings by God’s people sitting in the lap of victory. But the Psalmist is sneaking up on the real issue here because not everything is the hallmark of success. By verse 12 its clear that victory is not totally the case at hand. There is famine, there is disease and enemies abound. Not all is right with their world and there is distress in the land.

And then in verse 14, from the depths of difficulty – the claim is made that God is definitely with us. The writer says – “come again to our aide” we pray. “Be our rock and our redeemer.”

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Simon, *Why the Arctic Is Warming 4 Times as Fast as the Rest of Earth*, Wired, July 18, 2022, <https://www.wired.com/story/why-the-arctic-is-warming-4-times-as-fast-as-the-rest-of-earth/> accessed 8/10/22.

“We forgot who we were God!” We turned from you and your favor turned from us. We lived like we owned the place and your blessings failed us, and the wild boar has ravaged the land. God – do something!! We are again your people.

A lifetime of experience should tell us that the race set before us cannot be won by us alone and verses 18-19 represent our bargain, even today, with God – we will never turn away, revive us and restore us that we may be saved. Make your face to shine upon us.

Psalm 80 is an example of faith that celebrates, waivers, and pleads. A very human picture of faith.

So, I ask you, in verse 19 when it asks for God’s face to shine on them, doesn’t God’s face always shine upon us despite our circumstances, in good times and bad? Doesn’t God always remain, as Psalm 46 says, our refuge and strength? an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear... God is our refuge and strength in all things, at all times.

Reverend Julia Fuller is certainly to be commended for leading worship last Sunday. As she explained, this is not an easy time in her life.

Last Sunday she talked about waiting in faith. She used as a centerpiece for her sermon the preamble of what we are discussing in Hebrews today.

Hebrews 11:1 “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Our Epistle reading this morning continues from Hebrews 11:29-12:2

29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.

30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days.

31 By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.

32 And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. 35 Women received back their dead,

raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. 36 Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— 38 the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

39 These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, 40 since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 12:2 looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

**This is the Word of the Lord – Thanks be to God.**

Looking at the experiences of faith described in this biblical story, we should remember that in the times detailed here, all was done with an eye to the people's faith in a God they could not see and they rarely ever heard from. They did not have the history of a savior who promised life eternal for them, they didn't have a bible that told the Messiah's story, they did not have a Holy Spirit sent specifically to bring them alive as the church to do God's will on earth. But they established a foundation of leadership, of stepping out and doing life for their nation under the blessings of God.

They lived as Prov 16:9 tells us - In their hearts, humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps. They lived by faith, and their accomplishments were by faith and through faith.

But just like Psalm 80 spoke of, prosperity and blessings don't automatically come to those who are good and who believe.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout Christian history, followers of Jesus have been described as set apart, as wanderers in the world around us. Now, it seems we are all wanderers in the world, trying to get our bearings again. Coming out of Covid pandemic, as we are,

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<sup>2</sup> David Gray, Homiletical, 355

we have fewer connections with other people than ever before. Have you noticed it? At Stop and Shop, almost no one looks at you in the eye?

Yet we still live in a community of communities looking to find what to do next in our lives. God made us this way: to be in community. In Genesis 1:26 God speaks: “let us” make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion.<sup>3</sup> God is saying let us expand our community and let them run the show. So, here we are running the show. What now? Are we headed in the right direction? Should having dominion as God’s community ever mean the potential destruction of the land leading to the demise of mankind?

Well, we certainly hope not but, another problem of living on a warming planet is the side-effect of wild-fires raging all over the world. These past couple of years have seen devastating uncontrollable fires in this country, in Australia, Brazil, Indonesia, Greece, Spain, and even Siberia where one of the largest fires ever recorded burned for many months last summer.

At home, California fire experts estimate that the blazes that devastated Northern California’s wine country a few years ago emitted as much CO<sub>2</sub> in one week as all of California’s cars and trucks do over the course of a year. From the technical perspective again, “If we start to see a higher level of fire activity than in the past because of global warming, (the fires) become part of a climate feedback loop,” That means warming causes more fires, which emit more CO<sub>2</sub>, which causes more warming. And it doesn’t end when the flames subside, over the course of several decades after a big fire, emissions from decomposing dead wood far surpass the direct greenhouse gas emissions from the fire itself.<sup>4</sup>

From melting ice to wildfires, are we at a tipping point in the world? Is our community of communities risking uncontrollable disaster? What do we do now?

Julia, last week. talked about waiting on the Lord. I would hate to think that we would believe that this means sitting in our chairs doing nothing while we are also asked to run a race with perseverance. There are things that must be done that we can do and God will bless us in those things while we wait.

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<sup>3</sup> John Ritenbaugh, *Forerunner Commentary*, Genesis 1:26, <https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Bible.show/sVerseID/26/eVerseID/26/> accessed 8/10/22

<sup>4</sup>Bob Berwyn, *How Wildfires Can Affect Climate Change (and Vice Versa)*, Inside Climate News, quoting Guido van der Werf, Dutch researcher for the Global Fire Emissions Database, August 23, 2018, <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/23082018/extreme-wildfires-climate-change-global-warming-air-pollution-fire-management-black-carbon-co2/>, accessed 8/10/22.

We have talked often of being Christians in a local sense – to our neighbors, like our actual neighbors next door, at the market, at our jobs; being the church everywhere we are.

We've talked about serving God as the church beyond ourselves and beyond our regions.

We have also likely heard the phrase “think globally, act locally”.

So, let's think about being the church universal from a local place of action. What to do now?

My brother lives in southern Oregon in the house we grew up in. This is one of the hottest and driest years ever recorded there in 123 years (since they started keeping records). They are running out of water.

Two years ago, they had a fire that ripped through two entire towns devastating thousands. While he waits for God to tell him what to do next, he is praying with his church, they are working on ways to conserve water and teach others how to do the same. He's been a volunteer firefighter, and they are trying to reduce their CO2 footprint on the earth while they are collecting and providing food for people in need.

Most of this is pretty new to him as he is only been in the church for a couple of years. But he's asking the question; what do I do now? And he is changing his life to answer that question.

All of the heroes of the Bible that are talked about in this section of Hebrews were simply living their lives when God gave them a greater task. They changed their lives.

Gideon was hiding in a threshing room before he led an army, David was a sheep-herder before he was anointed King, the prophets were simply living their lives, waiting on the Lord until the word of God reverberated in the voice of man through them.<sup>5</sup>

The cloud of witnesses behind us calls us forward. We have a realistic faith in our futures because of what God has done the past.

In Hebrews 12:1 we are told to lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely to us. This describes the turning of repentance, turning our ways of life from us to God over and over again.

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<sup>5</sup> Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, introduction, viii

Think of this as taking on a structural change in how we live – like standing with the wind to our backs and turning to face the wind and live in the change. Turning from bad to good, turning toward a responsibility to God and neighbor.

We are told to follow in the footsteps of this great cloud of witnesses who chose to stand in the wind, and choose to trust God, walking in the footsteps of the true perfecter of our faith.

While we are waiting, we are changing; becoming more like Jesus in who we are. While we are waiting, we are doing; continuing to run the race set before us, we call life with perseverance. We endure all things ahead by looking toward Jesus, by praying, worshiping and doing.

One of my favorite shows ever was an early-2000's series called Firefly. It was kind of a science-fiction western. Think, Cowboys in space.

Anyway, in the follow-on movie sequel called Serenity, the bad guy, with an entire fleet supporting him, is suddenly faced with even more really bad guys suddenly attacking him.

There's this brief moment of in-action where everyone just stares at the oncoming enemy in disbelief. His next words are poignant and worthy of consideration. He says:

Target everyone! Somebody fire!

What am I supposed to do with my life now?

Do something! Do something in God's name. Wait on the Lord - in action. Turn from sin daily, walk in trust and faith, and know that God guides your steps. You can help this world!

The promise of faith is a new creation that invades our present reality, and makes the impossible possible.<sup>6</sup> Trust and faith are both forward looking activities based on past experiences and our history is replete with experiences of God's goodness. God will bless us in what we do when we wait in God's time.

I'm concerned for our world and I really want to answer the question "What am I supposed to do in my life – now?" but with God's answer.

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<sup>6</sup> John Shelley, Theological Perspective, 354

I truly believe that the answer to that question is in this passage from Hebrews; that with the examples of a great cloud of witnesses before me, I'm to run the race before me with perseverance, looking to the perfecter of my faith as I run.

While I wait on the answer to my big question: what am I supposed to do in my life? I will trust that whatever I do to help my world, will help.

So, I will think globally and act locally. I will donate my time and talents to living better while I run this race of perseverance. I will turn toward God and pray for the Lord's face to shine upon us that we might be saved and be effective in all we do, every day.

Amen