

"DO NOT LOSE HEART"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
June 9, 1991

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INTRODUCTION

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However, coaches are not the only persons who have to deal with extraordinary stress. Many very ordinary people do as well!

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"So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day."

He means by "the outer nature wasting away" that life is taking its toll.... physically, emotionally and mentally. Paul knew what it was to face hardship, and he knew what those hardships could do to us. As someone has said,

"If no one knows the trouble you've seen,
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How true. Life does take its toll...on all of us. And that toll is even greater thanks to the extra burden brought on by that most vexing of all demons - worry. Every problem that you and I have is always magnified by the amount of anxiety with which we surround it.

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They, in turn, recognized the prize for what it was and opened the can for this nervous political candidate. This newest winner wants to sue because of the anguish and stress that his \$10 prize caused him. I can't say that I sympathize with him...but worry does take its toll.

Remember the story of Sleepy Hollow? In Washington Irving's legend, Ichabod Crane - a schoolteacher - was wooing the belle of a small New England village. His rival for her love was a younger man. In their community, there was a legend about a "headless horseman" who rode around the country-side at night. Ichabod's rival for the hand of this young woman dressed up as the fabled phantom and late one night lay in wait for Ichabod. As Ichabod rode by, the headless horseman gave pursuit. Poor Ichabod was so frightened that he spurred his horse and was never seen again.

If only he had turned and faced the object of his fear rather than fleeing in panic, he would have discovered the truth. That is what worry can do to us, though. That is what stress does to us.

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Every stage of life has its own concerns...that's what it's saying. And the sad part is that we add to the weight of our concerns by the anxiety we bring to them. Someone has observed that,

"Worry it like a rocking chair. It will give you something to do, but it will not get you anywhere".

Now twice in this chapter Paul says, "We do not lose heart". Why? "Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day!" Though life takes its toll on our bodies, the "inner person" is being hopefully strengthened. How's that possible you may ask? How can we keep growing stronger internally even while life is taking its toll on us physically. Three ways.

BELIEVE IN THE FUTURE

First of all, you've got to believe in the future. St. Paul goes on to say this,

"For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen..."

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Contrast Churchill's testimony with that of Solzhenitsyn's in his Gulag Archipelago. He writes of convicts called "goners"...men who had given up all hope and were already "dead on their feet". They might shuffle along listlessly in line and stare vacantly a few more weeks...but it was all over for them. They had given up...that's why. Evidence is building that we cannot live without hope. Doctors know that telling some patients that they are "terminal" is in itself a death sentence. When people have no hope, when they give up - deterioration is rapid.

Paul was looking toward those things as yet unseen, but still anticipated and this hope kept him from losing heart. Belief in the future will do that. That is the first step we need to take in order to keep from losing heart...to strengthen the inner person even while the outer one is wasting away. Believe in your future.

FOCUS ON THE TASKS AT HAND

Then the second step is to focus on the tasks at hand. Those are wise who learn to let go of both their regrets regarding the past and their anxieties about the future and concentrate on those necessary things that must be done today. Did not Jesus say, "Do not be anxious about tomorrow...for tomorrow will take care of itself" (Matthew 6:34). And was it not Casey Stengel who use to tell his baseball players when he saw them tightening up in the homestretch of a pennant race, "We play 'em one at a time".

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"I've always made it a rule that when I shut the door, I've shut the door."

Good advice. However, he went on to explain that it used to be his habit to go to bed taking all of his troubles and his fears along with him. Sleeping poorly, his health was being undermined. One night he got up and went to the window. It was a beautiful night. He described it in these words,

"The garden below and the fields beyond were flooded in silvery moonlight...and the perfect tranquility mocked the surging tumult of my brain. Why had I locked the office door so carefully if I wished all the ledgers and cash books and order forms to follow me home? Why had I closed the bedroom door so carefully if I wished all the cares of life to follow me in?

I knelt down there at the windowsill, with the delivious air of the still night caressing my face, and then and there asked God to forgive me and since then, when I've shut a door, I have shut a door."

Yes, good advice for all of us. It's too late to do anything about the past. Who knows what tomorrow will bring? Besides, tomorrow will be determined at least in part by how we perform today. So, let's shut the door on the past and even on the future and let's make today a purposeful and productive one. How do we strengthen the inner person? First, believe in the future. Put a bit of hope into it. Second, focus on the tasks that are at hand.

TRUST IN GOD

Third, remember this that the essential key is to trust in God, to trust in your Heavenly Father. R. G. Letourneau once said,

"Worry and trust cannot live in the same house. When worry is allowed to come in one door, trust walks out the other door, and worry stays until trust is invited in again, whereupon worry walks out."

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TODAY'S GOOD NEWS

That, dear friends, is the good news for this day. The same God whose "eye is on the sparrow" is also watching over you and men. There is no burden He will not help us carry. There is no valley through which we walk that He will not walk with us. So, do not lose heart. Remember Paul's word that even as life takes its toll on our outer person, the inner person can ever be made strong. In summary then: believe in the future - your future. Second: focus on the tasks that are at hand. Three: trust Him and remember He cares for you.

PRAYER

The weather may be better or worse....we cannot tell. If it gets worse, help us to remember, O Lord, that it always changes. And that the dark skies hide a sun that is still bright. If it gets better, let its brightness not blind us to Your goodness, and in our gladness let us not forget You, whose goodness is the source of all our joy.

Free us from our anxiety so that we may walk bravely and without fear, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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Good advice. However, he went on to explain that it used to be his habit to go to bed taking all of his troubles and his fears along with him. Sleeping poorly, his health was being undermined. One night he got up and went to the window. It was a beautiful night. He described it in these words,

"The garden below and the fields beyond were flooded in silvery moonlight...and the perfect tranquility mocked the surging tumult of my brain. Why had I locked the office door so carefully if I wished all the ledgers and cash books and order forms to follow me home? Why had I closed the bedroom door so carefully if I wished all the cares of life to follow me in?

I knelt down there at the windowsill, with the delicious air of the still night caressing my face, and then and there asked God to forgive me and since then, when I've shut a door, I have shut a door."

Yes, good advice for all of us. It's too late to do anything about the past. Who knows what tomorrow will bring? Besides, tomorrow will be determined at least in part by how we perform today. So, let's shut the door on the past and even on the future and let's make today a purposeful and productive one. How do we strengthen the inner person? First, believe in the future. Put a bit of hope into it. Second, focus on the tasks that are at hand.

TRUST IN GOD

Third, remember this that the essential key is to trust in God, to trust in your Heavenly Father. R. G. Letourneau once said,

"Worry and trust cannot live in the same house. When worry is allowed to come in one door, trust walks out the other door, and worry stays until trust is invited in again, whereupon worry walks out."

And how true it is. It's like a construction crew that was building a new road through a rural area...knocking down trees as it progressed. The foreman noticed that one tree had a nest of birds who couldn't yet fly. He marked the tree so it