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Living the Jesus Life: Keeping Hope in the Midst of Uncertainties

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TEXT: Philippians 2:19-30 (ESV)

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.

I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

Dear Friends:

I have found it difficult to live with uncertainties in my life. Maybe you have, too – especially those things over which we have little control. Lately, with the Covid-19 pandemic, we've been living with lots of uncertainties. Will I get this virus that seems to

be taking over our world? If I do, will I survive it? Will I have to die alone, if it takes my life? When can I be “out and about” again, and not cooped up in my home? When can I get back to my normal life of being back at work, and being with friends, and physically worshipping and meeting with my congregation? When can I wrap my arms around those children and grandchildren again that I so miss? Will I regain my financial losses from these past few weeks? Will I have unemployment? And the questions go on and on. Uncertainties, and they of course fuel our anxiety. We all have to face uncertainties in life, whether you’re a Christian or not. It's a part of living in a broken world.

We see that to be the case with the apostle Paul. He's living with uncertainties in his life, such as whether or not he's going to get out of prison, what the outcome of his trial would be, would he get out of this situation alive? He had uncertainty about how the churches he had planted so carefully were now doing. He had uncertainties about some of the church leaders and false teachers going after followers from his congregations. We know from today's passage that he suffered to the uncertainty of Epaphroditus' illness and whether he would recover or die. He even talked of having sorrows in his life as he misses his freedom to travel and start new churches for the kingdom of God – would he ever get back on the road again for Christ or not? Paul was facing lots of uncertainties in his life. Yet, in the midst of all this uncertainty, Paul talks of having joy and rejoicing and confident hope. You have to wonder: where is that coming from, with all of this uncertainty? What's keeping Paul going? Well, he tells us in our passage for today.

First of all, he tells us that he had the risen Lord Jesus with him in all of these circumstances. Look at that opening statement: “I hope,” (which means “I have confidence or I'm trusting”) “in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy.” “I hope in the Lord Jesus,” – not myself, not luck, not what the pundits of the day are saying. “I hope in the Lord Jesus.” My hope is there. It must be emphasized that Paul's confidence resides in Christ as a living and active person in his life, not as a heavenly guarantee of his private desire. We just celebrated Easter three weeks ago. We celebrated that earthshaking news that Christ is risen (He is risen indeed!), that death is defeated, and sin is paid for, and Jesus as Lord, and He's alive and present for those who trust in Him. Remember the road to Emmaus story: along the county road two friends were joined by an unknown traveler. The two of them were in despair, mourning the death of the Lord Jesus. “We had hoped, hoped that He was the one to redeem Israel,” they said to the stranger. They were expecting to share their sorrow as they walked along the way.

Instead it was hope that met them on the road; hope opened the scriptures to them, hope broke bread with them, and hope still does with us. Later, the apostle Peter would write “We of been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” He’s alive! He’s on the loose, and He’s told us “Low, I am with you always.” Or in John’s gospel: “I will not leave you orphaned, but I will come to you.” That’s what the apostle Paul was experiencing as he said to those Philippians, “I hope in the Lord Jesus Christ to send Timothy to you.” There is a personal, dynamic relationship with the living Lord Jesus Christ at work there.

I love the old story about Christian writer G. K. Chesterton, who was approached by a reporter in London one day, who asked him in an interview:

“I understand you recently became a Christian. Can I ask you a question?”

Chesterton responded, “Sure.”

“Suppose the risen Jesus were to stand behind you. What would you do?”

And Chesterton responded, “But He is!”

That’s our confidence, our hope, as Christ followers. Think of the implications that the risen Lord is with us. No moment of life will ever be faced alone as we follow Him and serve Him in the world. He’s not gone. The world can’t see Him, but we can by faith in the crucified and risen Christ. And He is not only with us, but He is Lord, meaning He is God Himself – all-powerful. And He is active in this world. There is no hands-off policy at work here with Him. He’s making things happen through the working of His Holy Spirit in us and around us. He has the last word over this world is its Lord, promising us that will see Him face-to-face on the grand finale day; a new Heaven and a new Earth. No more sorrow or suffering or tears, He’ll wipe tears away from our eyes. What a glorious day to look forward to! And we know that whether we live for whether we die, we’re His forever. We read of His activity in this passage before us: God had mercy on Epaphroditus; “not only on him but on me, healing him lest I should have sorrow after sorrow,” Paul says. God is not distant, aloof, and inactive. Paul’s experiencing Him in that relationship of Christ. You just need to look around – the world is full of His presence and His glory.

I love what John Stott, that great old pastor who “graduated” not long ago, wrote. He said:

The Jesus who was born into our world and who lived and died in first century Palestine also rose from the dead, is now alive forever, and is available and accessible to His people. Christ isn’t to be relegated, like other religious leaders,

to history and the history books. He's not dead and gone, finished and fossilized. He's alive and active, and He calls us to follow Him, and He offers Himself to us as our indwelling and transforming Savior.

I love that! So how do we face uncertainties? By trusting in Christ Jesus and constantly calling upon Him, believing that He is here with us. That is a certainty to coin in the midst of uncertainties.

But, let's admit it: we long to see Jesus face to face. And even though we have His words of promise to trust in, sometimes we need God "with skin on." Like the story of the little girl whose momma heard her crying in the middle of the night. And mom went in and said "don't be afraid; there's a storm going on and it's dark in the room, but don't be afraid. Jesus is with you." And the little girl said, "I know, but right now I need Jesus with skin on." And that's what Paul had at work in his life: Jesus with skin on. And Jesus provides Himself for us that way as well. We see Paul expressing his gratitude, you see, for Timothy and Epaphroditus, who had come to be with Paul. Epaphroditus had come on behalf of the Philippians, who couldn't be there physically with him, so they sent Epaphroditus. And those two men were Jesus with skin on for the apostle Paul.

You see, the Christian life was never meant to be a lonely march, but walking in company. If you're in Christ, He has provided Timothys and Teresas and Toms and Epaphrodituses and Elaines and Elliots and on and on... Those two guys were with him, not only bringing him financial support and physical support, but moral support with their presence as well for those tough, uncertain days. Perhaps you can think of a few Timothys and Epaphrodituses is in your own life with Christ. Think back to people who have shown us that they're there with us, when they call or they write, they come and encourage. I recall a story in my life from a few years ago. It was a rough time in my ministry. I had been criticized in a tough manner by someone and it really did me in. I reached out to two trustworthy brothers in the faith, and the next thing I knew they had called me and asked if they could come in and be with me and pray with me. They built me back up that day, they carried me, they were my "Jesus with skin on," carrying their brother. Thank God for provision like that.

Sometimes we need to just open our eyes and see Him as He comes and approaches us in the faces of others. It's like that funny old story:

A guy is standing on his rooftop and there's a flood. The flood waters are rising to the roof, and a guy comes by his canoe and says "Get in, I'll take you to safely."

And the guy said, "No, God's going to take care of me."

And then another boat came by and said, "Get in, we'll take you to safety."

And he said, "No thanks, God is with me. He'll take care of me and He'll save me."

And then finally a helicopter flew overhead and a rope dropped, and they yelled down to him, "Hang onto the rope, we'll pull you up and take you to safety."

And the man said, "No, God is going to save me."

And then the waters came up, and the man drowned. And he stood before the Lord in His Heaven, and he said "Lord, I thought you would save me. I'm a little disappointed."

And the Lord said, "What you mean? I sent you a canoe, a boat, and a helicopter. What more did you need?"

Well, thanks be to God! In the midst of life's uncertainly, there's something there that we can always be certain of. For the person who is living life with Jesus and trusting in Him for salvation, there's the assurance that in the midst of uncertainties that life throws our way, He is with us. He is with us, and we can hope in Him. We can be right alongside of ol' Paul when he said in Romans, "I'm convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." "I'm convinced," Paul said. It's a testimony based on personal experience. Paul's relationship with the living, present Jesus; this was not theory, this was testimony.

Do you have that kind of confidence at work in your life today? Because, friend, you can, by placing your trust in Jesus Christ right now; asking Him in, surrendering yourself to His care and direction. Listen to this testimony from someone who knows the risen Christ well. He says:

The most wonderful thing that can happen to any one of us is to have that most profound of all experiences: to know Jesus Christ personally. You can hear about Him all your life and never really know Him. You can believe that that He lived, and respect Him and honor Him as a great historical figure. But when at last you experience His reality, when he comes off of that stained-glass window and out

of the books and becomes your living, personal savior, then you can walk through all manner of darkness, pain, and trouble, and be unafraid.

Friend, when you have Jesus Christ in your life, you have a friend to turn to in prayer. He says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." That's an invitation to open up your life to Him in prayer. He makes the first approach: "I want to be part of your life." When you have Jesus, you have a family to walk with you besides, to support you, who is "Jesus with skin on" for you, who can encourage you. Because 'those who belong to Christ' belong to 'those who belong to Christ.' You can connect with your family and wipe away those uncertainties, face those uncertainties with your brothers and sisters, as you call on them. Take advantage of that resource.

Uncertainties, you see, will always come knocking at our door. But there is one certainty you can face them with, and that certainty is: you are not alone. Jesus is with us. Like the Easter hymn testifies:

He lives! He lives! Christ Jesus lives today
He walks with me and He talks with me, along life's narrow way
He lives! He lives! Salvation to impart
You ask me how I know He lives; He lives within my heart.

Amen.