New Hope Sermon – **Conquering the Obstacles Facing all PhD students** - March 3, 2021

**Sharing the struggles of our PhD candidates**

Last Saturday the struggles several of our PhD students are facing became the focus of our zoom church time. Here are some insights from that meeting.

Alex:

Ph.D. life could be though and lonely. I think that situation is intensified due to the global pandemic. You lost the opportunity to reach out to faculties and other PhD students.

Some of you may just completed the exams for thesis opening. No matter what kinds of results you got, go and celebrate this moment. Because this is a mark of your PhD life, all the hard work got you where you are now.

So, my first advice is “remembrance”. Remember what you have achieved and give praise to God. It is He who gives you the strength and wisdom. It is He who accompanies you when there is no one else around. It is He who knows your pains and plans the best for you, even when you are uncertain of those plans.

My second advice is “be still”. We all have vision, sometimes it is clear, but sometimes not. We are easily influenced by circumstances, for example, the global pandemic, supervisors’ comments, friends’ suggestions. This is normal. And sometimes we are caught in self-doubt or self-denial. Be still, your PhD life is not just for the certificate; it is a story of walking with God in a particular setting. He will be with you, and He can use all kinds of things, good or bad, to grow you.

My third advice is “ask God to reveal/clarify your mission”. We all carry our mission in the Kingdom of God. What would be your mission in PhD life? Is it just for a certificate? Or there is something else you could do? (Alex Feb. 20, 2021)

Carol agreed: She added:

“God’s leading may start in any one place, but in the long run it may be best to: Seek his perspectives through the lens of vision/time (big pictures & specific little pictures) as well as perspectives through the lens of action (things to accomplish).

Challenges are inevitable. Evil will try to distract. We need to keep our eyes on God and who he is, celebrating along the way.

Mary Lou – two pithy sayings that reinforce these ideas, from the Good Clean Funny Network:

1. Surviving and living your life successfully requires courage. The goals and dreams you're seeking require courage and risk taking. Learn from the turtle; it only makes progress when it sticks out its neck.  
2. Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are. Gcfn

At the end of our church zoom time last week, the group asked me to do a sermon related to these issues. That charge is the basis for what follows:

**Help in times of trouble**

There is ample scripture which speak of the need for perseverance, resilience, enduring through struggles and obstacles, trusting God in the midst of reverses and challenges, and celebrating God’s interventions in large and small ways throughout life. Most of you are familiar with passages on these topics.

1. My first suggestion, therefore, is that you ask the Spirit to highlight one particular passage/ story/or character in the Bible and make that your focus for the years of your PhD journey. Memorize this verse or section; repeat it out loud to yourself and the enemy who lies through discouragement, wrong perspectives, slandering God’s character, and distracting you from this effort to keep God’s Word in the forefront of your mind. Write the passage out. Paste it in some prominent place so you will see if as you go about daily life – I pasted mine on the dashboard of my car since I was often in the car driving to and from school. If you are a compulsive eater, paste it on the refrigerator; to start the day focused, paste it on the bathroom mirror so you see it in the morning and at night. At the end of the day as you lay in bed, repeat that verse out loud and then begin with the Spirit to catalogue all the ways the Lord intervened for you throughout the day. That should lead to praise and thanksgiving as you go to sleep – a better peace-keeping strategy for our overactive mind than rehashing a problem that came up in classes or practicums or your writing or counseling or talk with a professor or supervisor etc.

2. Secondly, ask the Lord throughout your program to clarify the direction you’re to take – i.e., what does He want to do in and through you when you earn this degree? Alex compares this clarity to a lighthouse. Many times during the course of studies and research, you may feel like you are in a fog and God’s direction seems unclear. But ask God to keep revealing your directions to keep you on track and help you hold onto the prize at the end of your race. Phil.1:6 says God has begun a good work in you; He will see it through to completion. The Passion translates this as:

“*I pray with great faith for you*, because I’m fully convinced that the One who began this glorious work[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Phil.1%3A6&version=TPT#fen-TPT-10667a)] in you will faithfully continue the process of maturing you[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Phil.1%3A6&version=TPT#fen-TPT-10667b)] and will put his finishing touches to it until the unveiling[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Phil.1%3A6&version=TPT#fen-TPT-10667c)] of our Lord Jesus Christ!”

Beginning a PhD program, seeing God provide funding and opportunities in various classes and internships and resources can keep you going when the going gets tough.

Remember Jesus

“who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Heb. 12:2-3).

**Canoeing the mountains**

Lastly, in dealing with the reverses and challenges of any work of God in our lives, learn from those who have gone before you. The book I am reviewing this week is one Nancy recommended last week in church: *Canoeing the Mountains* by Tod Bolsinger (2015). I purchased it because the title highlights the very times we feel that what is before us is impossible. Those feelings are normal as mountain ranges loom up unexpectedly – whether in deadlines, circumstances, reverses, etc. But they are particularly normal when the difficulty of crossing over the mountains directly assaults our expectations and sabotages our vision and call. The context of the book is the historic quest of Lewis and Clark in exploring the United States in the early days of its new independence from England. President Thomas Jefferson commissioned Lewis as a military Captain to lead the expedition from the East Coast to the West Coast in search of a direct waterway that would open up commerce across the nation. Having picked Clark, another army comrade, and a handful of men as their Corps of Discovery, they set off with their canoes to discover this coveted waterway.

That waterway did not exist. In fact, all their expectations and charted maps of earlier explorers were wrong. Completely wrong.

Instead, at the Continental Divide, they encountered the formidable Rocky Mountain Range, stretching over the western terrain as far as the eye could see. Bolsinger uses the Lewis and Clark expedition as an analogy of what is facing church leaders in the West in our post-Christian age. He says, the book is “about the kind of leadership necessary for the local church to take the Christian mission into the unchartered territory of a post Christendom world. We are canoers who have run out of water. There is no route in front of us, no map, no quick fix or easy answer” (Bolsinger, 35).

But the lessons he extracts for Christian leaders of the church are equally applicable to the journey so many face in doing their PhDs. In that journey there are also frustrated expectations, failures, reverses, and adverse circumstances on top of the rigors of a formidable academic world. To help us internalize lessons from Bolsinger’s book, I will cite several quotes from the book, which I will italicize, and then make a few relevant applications for PhD students.

1. “*As he stepped off the map into uncharted territory, Merriwether Lewis discovered that what was in front of him was nothing like what was behind him and that what had brought him to this point in the journey would take him no farther…Lewis and Clark and their Corps of Discovery were looking for a water route, but now they had run out of water. How do you canoe over mountains?*

*You don’t. If you want to continue forward, you change.You adapt. Merriwether Lewis looked at the miles and miles of snow-covered peaks and knew that to continue his journey he would have to change his entire approach. . .We go from being river rats to mountain climbers. We keep on course with the same goal, but change absolutely everything required to make it through this uncharted territory. We ditch the canoes, ask for help, find horses and cross the mountains” (Bolsinger, 34).*

“*To publically acknowledge that we are now in uncharted territory, where there are no maps and few answers, allows us the freedom to innovate through experimentation, to encourage humility and inquisitiveness, to ask questions and to invite those with us into an adventure of learnin*g” (Bolsinger, 213). PhD research is original research. Therefore, by its very nature it can take us into uncharted territory. How you go forward with the successes and failures and often the need for basic reorientation requires the wisdom of God, the grace of flexibility and the God-inspired confidence to overcome unexpected obstacles.

2. “*Margaret Wheatley says, In order to counter the negative organizational dynamic stimulated by stress and uncertainty, we must give full attention to the quality of our relationships. Nothing else works, no new tools or technical applications, no redesigned organizational chat. The solution is each other. If we can rely on one another, we can cope with almost anything”* (Bolsinger, 168). Jesus understood how crucial this element is in weathering stress and conquering all the negatives that are thrown at us (Jn.17). That’s why God birthed the church after Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension to heaven. Believers could now be joined together by the Spirit in Jesus’ name and do mighty exploits together that they could never accomplish alone.

3. *“In the middle of a long, dark, rainy winter – their second since leaving St. Louis – it’s reasonable that the captains were growing weary of the expedition. The journal entries of their Christmas celebration were muted. “We have nothing to eat but poor Elk meat and no Sat to Season that with, but still keep in good Spirits as we expect this to be the last winter that we will pass this way. . . . Six weeks earlier they had been ecstatic. ‘Ocean in view O the joy!’. . .But now in the middle of the rainy, cold winter the excitement of seeing the Pacific had ebbed. They were still a long way from home. The continent they had just crossed was multiple times bigger than they had expected it to be. Instead of a water route, they had crossed 340 miles over land, 140 of them through rugged mountains, 60 of those through snow. The journey was longer and harder than they had expected and had led to a most stunning discovery: all the ‘maps’ were wrong! . . It would seem that after so much exploring, so much learning, so many trials and travails, and so much longing for the familiar comforts of friends and kin, the expected decision would be to return as quickly as possible…But they didn’t. . . because there was more to explore”* (Bolsinger, 205-206).

We keep on because there’s more to explore. There are new areas of research, new possibilities for application, continued empowerment to fulfill our life calling. So we stay the course, keep the original goal in mind, experience God’s interventions and are sustained and directed by the help of so many others. The Shoshone Indians were invaluable to Lewis and Clark as they pushed west, as was a teenage Shoshone mother Sacagawea, who had been captured from her tribe and become a wife of a French trader. He was already a scout with the Corps of Discovery. But she became the primarily one to lead Lewis and Clark and their team safely through the treacherous territory over the Rockies. That territory was uncharted for all the explorers, but it was home for her (Bolsinger, 190).

So beloved, a few questions for your reflection:

* What lessons are you internalizing from your own journey and from others who have taken their own journeys through the academic rigors of PhD studies and survived?
* Who are your Corps of Discovery colleagues?
* Who is your Sacagawea?
* What are your stories of how God has guided and protected you, through the trials and tribulations?
* And where is God leading you as you get to your Pacific Ocean destination?

Let Him write His story through you, beloved. Join with others of us who have gone before you and those who model the character, resilience and sheer courage of other adventurers and explorers. And stay close to the Lord. He is your wisdom; He is your rock; He is your fire by night and your pillar of cloud by day. He has put you in community and given you all you need in the wonderful Holy Spirit. Press on in praise and confidence – in Christ alone. We will press on with you. Amen. M.L. Codman-Wilson, PhD, Pastor,

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