

New Hope Sermon Flourishing 8 6 20

Tuesday this week the plants on the lanai caught my attention as I looked out the window of our living room. They are flourishing; their colors are vibrant and their leaves glossy green. This kind of beauty is what drew us to Florida in the first place, and it continues to delight my soul when I take the time to stop and reflect on their beauty and the Lord's creativity. Keith also loves the Florida weather and, like the plants, is flourishing here.



But, it is VERY,VERY hot here - too hot to even sit out on the lanai and enjoy this beauty up close. So, for these plants to flourish, they need constant care. Becky is the household gardener. She and I chose the ceramic pots and then she bought all the plants and arranged them artistically in the containers. She waters them and tends them so we have this lovely display day after day. Yet, this beauty coexists

with the wild life around us. Keith keeps remarking that he hasn't seen people swimming in the pond behind our house. But that's good-many of the Florida ponds are home for snakes and alligators!

This scenario has many parallels to one's walk with God, doesn't it? Like so many in this season our lives are enduring the scorching heat of trials and uncertainty with predators lurking in the background – predators of fear because of Covid's deadly presence, inner predators of our own frustrations or hopelessness because the normal anchors of life have been upended, inner predators of dissonant relationships and the wear and tear of people's suffering all around us. You can add to that list what those predators are in your life.

But God is Lord over all these factors and I want to call us back to intentional praise that comes when we remember Him.

For Keith and I the predators of aging and Alzheimers are ever-present. So I claim God's promises in Ps. 92:12-14 and Ps. 52:8-9 and Jeremiah 17:7-8:

Ps. 92: "But the godly will flourish like palm trees and grow strong like the cedars of Lebanon.

¹³ For they are transplanted to the LORD's own house. They flourish in the courts of our God.

¹⁴ Even in old age they will still produce fruit; they will remain vital and green."

Ps. 52: "But I am like an olive tree, thriving in the house of God. I will always trust in God's unfailing love.

⁹ I will praise you forever, O God, for what you have done. I will trust in your good name in the presence of your faithful people."

Jer. 17:7-8: "Blessed are those who trust in the LORD and have made the LORD their hope and confidence.

⁸ They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such

trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they never stop producing fruit.”

When we trust in the Lord and stay connected to Him, we can “flourish” and “thrive” no matter what drought there is or forces that would cause us to wither. We can stay green and never stop producing fruit. Hallelujah! And I’m holding God to it!!

These kinds of promises of God are all throughout the Scriptures. I think particularly of Isa. 61. Verse 3: “God will provide for those who grieve in Zion—...a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.” The Messiah Jesus, who claimed this scripture for Himself, changes our clothing. The spirit of despair or oppression wraps around us like a smothering cloak but the garment of praise lifts our spirits..

But there’s more in the context:

Isa. 61: “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,^[a] to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor to comfort all who mourn, ...They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.”

Oak trees can be very sturdy in great drought when they are near enough to water. They are able to send their roots down deep into the soil and stay alive through that water source. God says even in the context of great trials, at we can be the planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor – that’s flourishing!

When I asked Hanny and Eric what verses come to their mind of how to flourish in hard time, Hanny mentioned Romans 5:3-5:

“Even in times of trouble we have a joyful confidence, knowing that our pressures will develop in us patient endurance. ⁴ And patient endurance will refine our character, and proven character leads us back to hope. ⁵ And this hope is not a disappointing fantasy, because we can now experience the endless love of God cascading into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who lives in us!” (Passion Translation)

“Endless love cascading into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.” “ Hope that does not disappoint us.” This is the basis for flourishing.

The hymn the Spirit brought to mind as I think about these verses is: How firm a foundation. The words are based in part on the truths in Isaiah 43:

How firm a foundation you saints of the Lord is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!
What more can he say than to you he has said, to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?
‘Fear not, I am with you, O be not dismayed for I am your God and will still give you aid.
I’ll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand, upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.
When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie, my grace, all sufficient, shall be your supply.
The flame shall not hurt you, I only design your dross to consume and your gold to refine.
The soul that on Jesus still leans for repose, I will not, I will not desert to its foes.
That soul though all hell should endeavor to shake, I’ll never, no never, no never forsake.’
(words: Rippon’s Selection of Hymns 1787, music: Funk’sChurch Music 1832).

This has been the consistent testimony of the people I am reading about in Tim Keese's book *A Company of Heroes, Portraits from the Gospel's Global Advance*. Consistently, these men and women, who have dedicated their lives to reaching many Muslim unreached peoples around the world, have experienced much suffering and daily danger. Possibilities of terrorism and persecution, discouragement and loneliness are the predators they face. But they press on. The chapter called 'Facing Fear' on 3 of these "heroes" opens with this quote by Tertullian, a North African Christian, penned around the year 200. "The more you mow us down, the more we grow. The blood of Christians is seed." (Tim Keese, *A Company of Heroes*. Crossway, 2019. Pp.23). Indeed, their stories show God's constant care and sovereignty. God alone is opening doors no one can shut. God alone is giving them courage and strength and is always with them.

Georgi Vims, a Baptist preacher, who was imprisoned for eight years in a Russian Siberian prison, testified from prison cell #44: "I am not alone here. My brothers in the faith are in many neighboring cells. Even within these walls God is strengthening our faith and inspiring radiant hope in our hearts! Christ is unconquerable." (pp. 143) His unquenchable faith is seen in each of the stories in this book. Samuel Zwemer, known as the Apostle to Islam, said: "Those who have once seen the scars of Jesus can never live the old life again. He never hid his scars to win disciples. He showed them. They proved His victory and are the badge of His eternal authority" (p.191).

And in that victory each believer can flourish despite the "predators" within and around us – as Zwemer did, as Vims did, as Tertullian did, and as William Carey did. Carey, also cited in the *Heroes* book, has been called the "morning star of modern missions" (p. 211). His "predators" included "fires, floods, funerals, persecution, poverty, loneliness, betrayal by friends and slander by critics...[Yet] Steady, purposeful, plodding was Carey's greatest strength. [He had] miserable days as well as days when he preached good news to hundreds. There were the triumphs of putting the Bible into the languages of millions of people in South Asia and of seeing [Asian] Indians turn 'to God from idols to serve the living and true God' (1 thes.1:9)...Carey's vision-in-action influenced generations of gospel risk-takers. A great company of heroes – from Adoniram Judson to Amy Carmichael, from Jim and Elizabeth Elliot to missionary pathfinders today – continue, like Carey, to make Jesus famous to the ends of the earth" (p. 213).

That's the company of the faithful I want to be found among and what God wants for each of His followers worldwide. And this goal returns us to the initial analogy of our flowering pots on our lanai in the Florida heat. When God is the One who cares for us, as the Great Shepherd of our souls, He is the One who will "equip you with everything good for doing his will, working in us what is pleasing to him through Jesus Christ." (Heb 13:20-21). Amen.

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