

## **You Must Go Through It**

### **Psalm 20**

Rarely, if ever, do I turn to television commercials to find inspiration. But it just so happened that the other night Julie and I found ourselves in Lapeer stopping off for coffee, and as I waited for her to place our order, I glanced up at the TV and saw your typical sports commercial.

I'm not even sure what product they were trying to push, but it had all the stereotypical images of athletes. First, they were training, struggling, grimacing, sweating profusely and then finally smiling, celebrating, and hoisting shiny new championship trophies. And then this phrase flashed across the screen: **You Must Go Through It.**

Right about then, Julie arrived with our order, so I still didn't catch what they were selling, but right then and there I knew I had the title of my Sunday Message.

For three days I had been struggling with trying to understand Psalm 20. Well, maybe not so much struggling to understand it, but struggling with how to communicate my findings. It's one thing to comprehend something. It's completely another thing to be able to convey the essence of the meaning to the audience in a manner that helps them go beyond understanding the message to embracing it.

This is the basic challenge of preaching. Taking what you know to be true and shaping into a form that causes the audience to say to themselves, "Yes, I get it, I agree with it, and now I must do something about it."

If a preacher accomplishes this on any given Sunday, then he better get down on his knees and thank the Lord, because if he's smart, he will quickly realize that God, by his Holy Spirit, just used him mightily to perform real miracles in the lives of the listeners.

This should always be the goal of the preacher: to preach in such a way that God is glorified because the message he delivers is transformative, positively affecting the lives of the listeners.

But to be honest, I'm not sure this happens all that often, because for this miracle to take place, both the preacher and the congregation must be spiritually prepared and spiritually linked.

For the preacher's part, he must be consistently in the Word of God beseeching the Lord's guidance and wisdom, asking God to show him the message he has for the saints.

At the same time, he must be rubbing shoulders with the saints, trying to understand the parishioners' lives, their needs, desires and struggles. If these things are in place, then the message can be a powerful one, and then God's word, sharper than a double-edged sword, can do its surgery. But this is only part of the equation.

The other part is the responsibility of the listeners. The hearers must come by faith, believing that the preacher has done his homework and more importantly, believing that God desires to speak through him to them so that both the lives of the preacher and the listeners might become further aligned to His will.

This is God's desire for his church, just as Paul prayed for the Ephesians: *"that God may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."*

To be totally frank, I have a difficult time understanding, let alone experiencing, what it means to be filled with all the fullness of God, but nonetheless, this is God's goal for us.

So being prepared to receive God's Word on Sunday morning can present all sorts of challenges for us. Maybe you just came off a terrible week and everything you tried to accomplish went wrong. Now you're are in no mood to be preached to.

Maybe you rushed around the house this morning trying to get your family ready for church, but they seemed to fight you at every turn. Now your nerves are shot and your emotions frazzled. Your spiritual antenna will probably have a difficult time tuning in to God's Word.

Maybe you're at odds with the pastor. He said something or did something that really rubs you the wrong way, and now there's no way you can separate the message from the messenger.

Maybe you haven't been at church in years, and you're a bit nervous because you don't know anyone and since you're new, you get this strange feeling that everyone's wondering about you, staring at you.

You may be surprised to learn, that I get all that stuff. I get that the souls that have congregated today in the house of God have been through a myriad of different life experiences, some that happened this morning and others that happened 30 years ago.

All this emotional and sometimes traumatic baggage impacts our reception of God's Word. This is all part of the spiritual battle that we find ourselves in which makes my job, from a human perspective, seem useless and mundane, but from God's perspective, a job that is infinitely important because God is using me to address and engage the human spirit.

So I believe, and so should you, that God can and will move all that stuff out of the way that needs to be moved in order that He can be heard clearly and completely for our sakes and for his glory. Nothing is too difficult for the Lord. But we must have faith.

So here's what I believe God is saying from Psalm 20: Each of us, on an individual and personal level, must experience some crisis of belief before we can be saved by Him. Each of us must have a crisis of faith before we finally surrender our lives to Him.

And the corollary to this statement is that we cannot genuinely praise God until we are in fact, saved by Him. This goes back to that crazy TV commercial that I saw. **We must go through it**, before we can hoist the trophy – and the trophy represents our incorruptible and eternal relationship with the living God through Christ.

The "it" is a point in our lives when we can finally say beyond a shadow of a doubt that God has saved us. Up until this point, we've believed, either consciously or unconsciously that we have no need of being rescued, that we, in ourselves, are sufficient, that we have no need to have our relationship with God restored, that God is up there and we're down here and there is no possible way or reason why these two kingdoms should ever meet. This is earth and that's heaven and these two realms really have nothing to do with each other.

This is how lots of people think, maybe not consciously, but more importantly, this is how they live. And I can completely understand why, because when one tries to be religious without being saved and spiritually alive with God's Spirit, and without coming to a crisis of belief of which I speak, nothing adds up. It's like a math equation with no possible solution.

Each one of us, before we truly come to Christ, try in vain to ease that gnawing feeling in our spirit and mind that we are under God's spotlight, and because we haven't measured up to God's holy and righteous standards, we, on some level, understand that we remain under God's judgement, so we do crazy things like go to church and

pray and read our Bibles and try our hardest to be nice to certain people even though we really can't stand them.

We do these things because we think that maybe God will be merciful. After all, God's loving and merciful and forgiving, right? Yes he is, but we must come to Him on his terms, not ours.

But do you see the "It" in Psalm 20? Do you see the crisis of faith that stares down the participants, particularly the King?

The occasion of this psalm is that the King is about to face his enemies, and many in his kingdom are praying for his victory and safe return. This is what the first four verses of psalm 20 are all about. The king goes off to war against his enemies to protect his own. Will he have success? I don't know, but we'd better pray for him. And so they do:

*"May the Lord answer you when you are in distress; may the name of the God of Jacob protect you. May he send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion. May he remember all your sacrifices and accept your burnt offerings. May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed."*

This is a nice heart-felt prayer. It belongs here. After all, The Book of Psalm is the Jewish Book of Prayer! But the petitioners don't know the outcome! They don't know if they'll ever see their king alive again, but if they do, they vow to throw him a party he'll never forget. Look at verse 5: *"We will shout for joy when you are victorious and will lift up our banners in the name of our God."*

In other words, they're not going with him. I'm not saying that nobody is going with the king, I'm just saying that many are not, and in a very real sense the king has to go alone. The prayers are wonderful, and I'm sure greatly appreciated, but in the end, the enemy is still out there and must be faced, and the king goes alone.

This is true for me and you as well. We must face the "It" alone. It is our crisis of faith – our crisis of belief, and it's personal. My crisis of belief is not John's or Kurt's or Brian's or my wife's. and I guarantee that the "It" will strike more than once in our lives.

You get let go from a job. Will God find you another one? You're up there in years and the thought of being retrained for another career sounds hopeless. Your marriage dissolves after 30 years and you find yourself setting up an apartment just for yourself. You're in college and have no idea what career path you want to take. Maybe you're addicted to alcohol, drugs, or pornography and you wonder if there is even the slightest chance that you can ever be healed.

The list of "Its" is never ending: health concerns, bankruptcy, broken relationships, depression, unexpected deaths. All these events that come to us sometimes unexpectedly and at other times the writing was on the wall long before we ever wanted to admit it. All these things can cause us to have a crisis of faith.

Will God rescue the king? Maybe. But what if he doesn't? What if the king's head comes back on a pole instead the king riding victoriously into the city on a chariot?

In psalm 20, we don't know the outcome. We're left speculating, but if psalm 21 is connected with psalm 20, as many Biblical commentators think, then we pretty much know the outcome. Psalm 21 is all about praising God for giving the king many victories. *"How great is his joy in the victories you give!"*

But here's the kicker in all this and I think it's found in verse 6 of Psalm 20. Do you hear the confidence in the king's voice when he says, *"Now I know that the Lord saves his annointed"?*

Wow! Remember, the first five verses are from the perspective of the those praying for the king – *may God answer you, may God protect you, may he send you help, and we'll shout for joy when you return* – but all of a sudden the voice changes. We go from the second person voice to first person.

It's no longer the prayers of the people! It's the king himself speaking! And he's saying with confidence that his God saves him, **not that he will save him**, but that he has already saved him! And he hasn't even faced his physical enemy!

Yet, he has faced his spiritual one and has found victory! Even before the physical battle has started!

The enemy of the king's heart and mind and spirit and soul - the enemy of unbelief - has already been defeated before the battle has even begun!

The king has faced the "IT" that has waged war with his soul and has won! The king faced his crisis of belief alone and came out on the other side victorious even before he's mounted his horse! He won because he knew the Lord and the truth about his own relationship with Him: ***"The Lord saves his anointed"***!

Do you believe that the Lord saves his anointed?

What I'm trying to say in all this is that we can never be quite sure of the physical outcome of our battles. Maybe we'll be struck down with cancer or some other terminal disease. Maybe we will never be reconciled to our spouse. Maybe we will end living in a van down by the river, but no matter our circumstances, we can still have peace and hope and joy knowing that God will have the ultimate victory in our lives because we are his anointed and are found in Him.

*"Some trust in chariots and some trust in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. We rise up and stand firm."*

I guess I do have to make one correction. The King never went alone into battle. He may have felt like he was going alone as he pondered the responsibilities that rested on his shoulders. But Psalm 23 reminds us that God is only one small prayer away: *"Yeah, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me."*

As a pastor of a church, I'm never far removed from the question that seems to be on everyone's mind: Why is church attendance down?

This question is posed not just of this church but a myriad of churches throughout the world. And I think I may have part of the answer, because it's not that hard to figure out.

And perhaps the best way to answer this question is with another question: What is the purpose of church? Isn't it to bring honor and praise and glory to God?

Well, how can we do this, if we haven't gone through "It"? If we haven't gone through the testing and the trying of our faith to see if in fact our faith is genuine and real. If we haven't faced our "IT" and have not come out on the other side knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that God saves - If we haven't experienced this, then we have no reason or motivation or desire to praise God and to thank Him for his amazing and unending love for his people, his anointed.

<sup>6</sup> Now, may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, <sup>17</sup> encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. Amen.