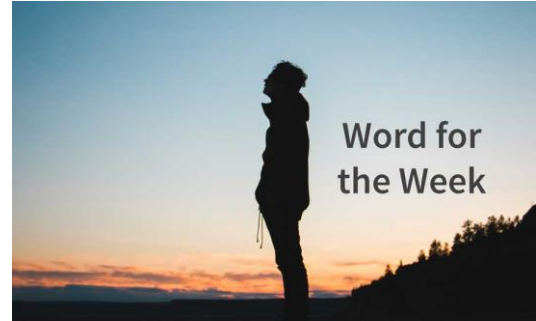


Joyful Confidence Amidst the Challenges

Scripture Reading: Luke 21:25-36

“Take the outside shot!” Joe, a particularly big and talented basketball player, wrote these words on a feedback form after a weeklong leadership seminar I taught for Exxon Chemical. Several of us had played basketball during our lunch breaks. Joe couldn’t figure out why a guy who was a foot smaller than him would waste time trying to get past him when my odds were so much better simply pulling up and shooting from the outside.



Thinking of how congested things can get around the basket in a game like that makes me think of how challenging circumstances can become as we get closer to our goals. In football, the last twenty yards before the goal line are typically the most difficult. In hockey and soccer, it is the same. The opposition closes in and does everything in their power to keep you out. They know that their defeat is only inches from becoming a reality and that victory for you is so close you can taste it.

This is what Jesus is getting at in Luke 21:25-36 and other passages when he speaks of the difficulties ahead for his followers. Things are going to get harder. They will go from bad to worse. But do not be afraid he tells us. In fact, be especially alert when you see these things taking place. The Son of Man is “coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” When the going gets tough, lift up your head and look ahead with joyful confidence.

It makes me think of the famed Heartbreak Hill in the Boston Marathon. Coming a little over twenty miles into the race, it is a terrible test for runners, but it is also a sign for them that the end is near, which for the runners is a really good thing. When runners come to the hill it is time to dig deep, to make sure you don’t give up, to keep putting one foot in front of the other, to lift up your head and run. The end is near; your goal is almost in sight.

This is one of my favorite verses in the Bible (granted, I have quite a few of them). When things get tough, “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” This is true as we see the challenges that are sure to appear as life in this world comes to an end and the new age begins when Christ returns. But it is also true in the meantime, in the ups and downs of human existence as it has always been, with its new beginnings and its grief-full endings. Through it all, especially when the going gets tough, God invites us to stand up tall, to raise our heads with hope and joyful anticipation, and to run with confidence that God is faithful and his promises are true.

Prayer:

God of new beginnings, thank you that you are with me when the going is tough and when my strength and courage are being tested. Forgive me for focusing on my troubles and forgetting your faithful presence, promises, and power. By your Spirit, enable me to stand with courage in the face of adversity, to raise up my head and find my strength in you, and to venture forward with joyful confidence knowing that you are with me and the future is in your hands, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Suggested Verse for Meditation and Memorization:

Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is at hand. Luke 21:28

Things to Try:

- As you pray about those things that trouble you, raise up your head, take a deep breath, and look toward heaven. As you pray, give thanks for God's faithfulness, that he sees you and hears you as you pray. Pray boldly (Hebrews 4:16), with joyful confidence and thanksgiving (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).
- As you head into challenging situations today/this week, stand still and raise up your head for a moment before entering in (before walking into the room or speaking), look to God and take a deep breath praying for the Holy Spirit to enter in and give you strength, wisdom, and faith.
- Every time you see or hear something that starts to get your anxiety going, take a brief moment to raise your head up, take a deep breath, and look to God with thanks.
- Continue or start the practices of giving thanks we suggested practicing until Christmas including:
 - Take a moment right now, count your blessings, and thank God for them.
 - As you begin each day, thank God for five things you are grateful for as you look to the day ahead. (writing them down will make this exercise even more helpful.)
 - As you end each day, thank God for five things you are grateful for as you look back on the day. (writing them down will make this exercise even more helpful.)
 - Go out of your way to thank someone who has blessed you.
 - Take three minutes before or after lunch to look out the window, notice God's blessings, and give thanks for them.
 - Talk with God about the challenges you are facing, the worries you are dealing with. Balance your statements of concern with statements of gratitude for God's presence, power, and provision.
 - Put an object in your pocket or in another place that will lead you to notice it and say a prayer of thanks each time you notice it through the day.
- As you reflect on the meditation/memorization verse, think of the ways in which each phrase in the verse serves as an encouragement to you.

Further Suggested Readings:

- Psalm 25:1-10
- 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13
- Jeremiah 33:14-16
- Habakkuk 3:17-19