

Hold Fast, Brothers

A Word of Encouragement for Pastors

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Pastors, I know the last year has been challenging. As I heard someone recently say, “If this ain’t difficult times, they’ll do until difficult times come!”¹ Some of you may feel like the guy in the P. G. Wodehouse novel described as “A melancholy-looking man, he had the appearance of one who has searched for the leak in life’s gas-pipe with a lighted candle.”²

The fact is that pastoring is challenging work. Too often it is thankless. And pastors’ wives often feel it even more deeply than we do. Slightings against the one you love are often harder to forgive than slightings against yourself.

People can insult you when they’re not even trying to! Comments after sermons are some of the easy examples. Early in my ministry, after I had preached one Sunday, a dear lady said to me, “You’re going to be a good little preacher one day.” I knew she meant well, so it just struck me as humorous. It held

¹ Mike Holley, “7 simple suggestions for leading in a crisis”, n. 17, <https://www.tdcaa.com/journal/%ef%bb%bf7-simple-suggestions-for-leading-in-a-crisis/>

² P. G. Wodehouse, “*The Man Who Disliked Cats*,” in *The Man Upstairs and Other Stories* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1971), 92.

out hope that one day I'd do well. Apparently not *today*, but one day. However, the hope is limited since what I will one day attain to is being a good *little* preacher. I'm not sure exactly what that would be, but I am pretty sure that's not what I had aspired to. We all have our stories when people have zinged us even when they meant to be encouraging.

Then there was Mrs. Maudie, an elderly lady in a church I pastored in Wisconsin. I was including more Scripture reading in our worship services and one Sunday as she left after the service, Mrs. Maudie, in her gruff way said, "If you'd read one more verse this morning I was going to walk out!" I just smiled and said, "Why, Mrs. Maudie, if I'd known that I'd have read one more." She actually appreciated that sort of give and take.

But, too many people in our churches aren't just gruff or stumbling over intended compliments. Some are difficult and simply mean. As one pastor said to me recently, "People aren't at their best right now, and some seem to think they can take it out on pastors because they think we have to be nice." Many of you over the last several months have had some people mad that you've taken too much precaution over COVID-19 while others in the same congregation are mad that you haven't taken more precautions. Some think you should have spoken more to the current political and cultural unrest, and some think you have said too much about it. This sort of tension can just weigh on you, eating away at your soul, even some times causing you to take more offense at things than you normally would.

This has been a deeply challenging time for many of you. Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661), the great Scottish preacher, is a wonderful companion in trying times. To friends and church members he wrote "you are in the common way to heaven when

you are under our Lord's crosses," and "I know that an afflicted life looks very like the way that leads to the kingdom" (Acts 15:22).³

Rutherford went on to say to one in the midst of suffering, "count much of your Master's smiling."⁴ Of course the problem when you're down is that you don't think He is smiling at you. Let me remind you that when you continue to labor faithfully, simply plodding along though no one notices, He smiles upon you. When you work hard at your sermon preparation, even though when it comes time to deliver it seems to fail, when you labor for the best way to arrange services in light of the Corona virus and end up with people bothered because you did too little and others because you did so much, still He smiles. You know this, but I need to let you hear it from someone outside your own head: God's love for you is not dependent on others evaluation of you. His love for you does not wax and wane with the opinion of your church. Your God is for you. He is with you, and He is steady. So hold fast.

Hear Rutherford to a faithful sufferer once again: "**my master bade me tell you, God's blessing shall be upon you for it.**"⁵ I'm here on behalf of the master to say, as you faithfully serve the Lord, regardless of whatever else is going on around you, His blessings are on you for it.

Central to our perseverance and joy in difficult times is the hope of the resurrection. After his powerful exposition of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul concludes with this exhortation which we need to take to heart:

³ Samuel Rutherford, *Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, ed. A. A. Bonar (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1891) 58, 50.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵ Rutherford, *Letters*, 55.

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. (ESV)

Let me point out three basic points from this text.

1) First, be steadfast, immovable.

Don't doubt in the dark what you knew in the light. You know the truth of God. You know who He is. You know His word is true. When things are difficult and you hurt or you're confused or uncertain, hold on to what you knew was true in the light. Be steadfast, immovable. That doesn't mean that you hold fast to your own opinions so that no one can help you see something differently. But you hold to God's word.

All about us people are being swept away. People are giving in. People are changing their opinions about God, about His word, about the teachings of His word. They seem to be chasing cultural acceptance rather than favor of God. Be steadfast, be immovable. We see leaders fail and compromise. And too often, somebody will say to me, "Well, hey, do you still believe that?" Yes. "But didn't you know that this big name has changed his opinion?" My answer is, "Who is he to me? God's word is not changed." I'm grieved when I see people move away from the scriptures, but I'm not moved. The right side of history will be revealed at the judgment seat of Christ.

As people compromise and let us down, we must remember,

My hope is built on nothing less
than Jesus' blood and righteousness.

I dare not trust the sweetest frame, - or some leaders' fame,

but wholly lean on Jesus' name.

On Christ, the solid rock, we stand.

All other ground is sinking sand.

It really doesn't matter who turns another way. God has spoken. What he said 2000 years ago was true 1000 years later, is true now today. He has shown Himself true in so many ways, chiefly or ultimately in the resurrection. So brothers, be steadfast, immovable.

2) Secondly, Paul says "always abounding in the work of the Lord."

Don't stop. Keep going.

Keep on abounding. You might say, "I don't feel like I'm abounding right now. I don't know if I can keep on abounding." Stay at it. Stay at this steady, faithful work. One of the real problems that affects us in church ministry today is this idea that the grand, the spectacular, the big splash is what demonstrates God's favor. But look through the scriptures, and you see that is not so. Brothers, keep plodding. When you are working on that sermon and the last one felt like it fell apart and this one just doesn't seem like it's going to come together, keep plodding. When you're not even sure who's going to be hearing it anyway, whether there will be many people there, whether they will be watching online, keep plodding. And when you can't read the faces of people in masks and can't even see people who are online to know how they are responding, so you're tempted to ask, "What's the point?"- keep plodding. It all feels futile because you can't see results. But keep plodding.

Prepare that sermon; make that phone call. It's a great time to

be following up with our people in that way. You can't go into some of the places, but you can call them. And maybe you've made several calls and nobody answered, or they didn't seem to care, or they didn't want to talk. Make that other call. Just keep plodding.

And even as we talk about this, though, there might be some souls that are the bruised reed. Maybe some of you are thinking, "That's not me. I haven't been doing that." Maybe even my words, which are meant to encourage, might feel like discouragement. "I'm not doing what I need to do. I've not done all that I need to do." Remember Peter, after his failure. When Jesus came to him to restore him, He didn't ask, "How hard will you work?" He didn't ask, "How smart are you?" He didn't ask, "How important are you?" He just asked, "Do you love me?" Do you love Jesus? I know you do. And he is ready to restore us and continue to use us. Don't worry then about the standards of importance or success. Just love Him, hold fast to Him, and then serve and love His people. He will be pleased, and, in that, you can be pleased. He called us knowing we were as messed up as we are. He knew more of our sin than we knew at the time. But he brings us back to the cross. He will restore. He will continue to use. And let me just stress here too that though it is a sin to give up on the Lord, it's not a sin to be discouraged.

Here is another familiar text. Jesus at Gethsemane says to the disciples with him, "My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death" (Matt 26:38; NASB). This is the sinless Savior speaking. You may face some times when you are deeply grieved. This can come on the pathway to the kingdom. Our Lord and Master was there. It is no shame if you find yourself there. But remember what he said in that situation. When he asked that this cup might pass

from him. But then he said, "Nevertheless, not my will, but your will be done." It's another way of saying, "Keep on abounding. Keep plodding." He calls us to be steadfast, immovable. He calls us to keep abounding, to keep plodding.

And if that was the end of it, that'd be a pretty rough story because it would basically be, "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps." And that works okay until you do it enough, then you break your bootstraps. And there's just not enough in us to get it done. So that's not where he ends. The last part of the verse points to the hope which empowers this perseverance.

3) **"Because you know your labor isn't in vain."**

The resurrection is the ground of our hope. Paul reminds us that our labor, whatever it is, whatever it feels like right now, whatever the response is right now- because there is a resurrection, your labor is not in vain. God will not allow one drop of your sweat or blood to drop in vain.

Right now you may feel overwhelmed with the sense that you've poured out your heart and absolutely nothing is coming from it, but we must remember not to trust in our feelings. If I can borrow Rutherford's language, "The master bade me tell you your labor is not in vain." On the authority of God's Word, as you faithfully serve him, your labor is not in vain. Of course, we want to see the results. I love it when I can see the results of God at work through me, and that's good and fine. The Lord blesses us by letting us see a result, see a life changed. But we're not promised that. I think sometimes, in my own life, God doesn't let me see or even feel the results. I think sometimes the Lord withholds that just to remind me, "I'm the one doing this, not

you.”

Whether or not you can see what God is doing, your labor is not in vain. Your faithful, steady service is accomplishing more than you can see, more than you can know. And this is seen straight way through scripture and has become one of my favorite truths. Recall Haggai chapter two where Haggai is preaching, “Rebuild the temple.” Then the people obey and we’re surprised because they hadn’t been obeying very often by this time in the Old Testament. The Temple is rebuilt. This is amazing! And the younger people celebrate. You can hear the celebration a long way off. But the older people mourn and weep because this new Temple was so small and unimpressive.

They remembered Solomon’s temple. You can imagine the people saying, “This thing is the new temple? Are you kidding me? This is what Haggai was sent by God to tell us to do? It might have been better to do nothing rather than to do this. It’s an embarrassment. God can’t be pleased with this. This doesn’t show the glory of God.” But God, through the prophet, says, “The glory of this house will be greater than the glory of the former house.” Now, I think if I were there, I’d be scratching my head and thinking, “I don’t see it. I mean, you can do a big time makeover on this little thing and it is still not going to be more glorious than Solomon’s temple.” I think those people who heard that probably died wondering how this would ever be. But you and I know how it was.

Herod comes along. He does some refurbishing, but it’s still not like Solomon’s. But it’s that little temple where the Lord Jesus is presented as a child. It’s that little temple where Jesus comes teaching and preaching. It’s that little temple where the veil is torn in two when Jesus inaugurates the new and living

way into the presence of the Lord. That little temple, its glory was far greater than the earlier temple because of who came there and what he did. But the people who built it couldn’t see it at the time. God was doing more than they could imagine. Right now, as you labor, there are times you may be tempted to think, “This is nothing.” Some people may say to you, “This is nothing. You’re telling us to do these things, it looks pretty paltry.” God is doing more than you could ever imagine.

I just pointed us to Matthew 26 at Gethsemane. With merely human eyes, what do we see? We see a traveling teacher who’s gotten a lot of attention and now he’s in trouble. And he is sorrowful to the point of death. And he’s about to get killed. That’s not much. But in that moment, God is at work reconciling the world to himself. He is there in that moment, which looks like complete defeat, rescuing my soul and yours. God is doing more than you can imagine. And this reality is the basis for Paul’s exhortation, “So be steadfast, immovable.”

We are going to see this in the resurrection. We are going to have to die in hope because we’re not going to see it all. We’re not going to see it all in our lifetime. Some of you may see more results than others. And we should thank God when we see it. But what we’re waiting on is the final day. That is when we will see.

11 years ago my older brother died in a freak accident. Totally out of the blue I got a call after I’d just barely fallen asleep. It was rough. I went down to be with my family, and after the funeral I came back for a conference I was supposed to lead. As I was moving about attending to last minute things while attendees arrived, a guy who meant well caught me and asked how I was doing. I thanked him and told him I was doing ok. It wasn’t the

time but he apparently thought I wasn't facing the heartache of the situation enough (though he didn't know me well). So he began, "Pain. Pain. Pain that will last forever." Now you know some of these people who just have the gift of encouragement, don't you? I thought, "Why are you saying this to me? I assume you think you're trying to help me face the reality of something. This is not helpful." But without me thinking about it, something just welled up inside of me. I didn't say this out loud, but there welled up inside of me a deep "No!" Pain, yes. Deep pain, yes. But not that will last forever. There is a resurrection. There is a great, getting-up Sunday, when all will be made right, the dead in Christ will rise, His truth will be vindicated and God himself will wipe away all our tears. So yes, pain. Yes, it's not all great right now. But there is coming a day when that is gone. Pain is real now, but it does not have the last word. And on that day, you will be able to see what God has been up to.

We will not be able to see it now. This is why we walk by faith and not by sight. We live by hope. You may say, "But I want to see." I know. I do too. But he calls us to trust him. He calls us to rest in him.

When our kids were young I often would take my boys on little "hikes" near our house, and I would typically make up a story about what adventure we were on as we went. One year around Christmas, we crossed the road into a field as knights on a grand adventure waylaying the bad guys with our sticks as swords. Along our way we came to a manhole right next to a train track. I was spinning the tale, so of course there was a princess down there and we rescued her (without going down into the manhole- this is pretend remember!). And then I began to realize, "Wait a minute, we've got to get back. We're about to

be late to an event!" I didn't want to blow the story and the fun, so I had to create a turn in the story. So I addressed the 3 young boys before aged between 5 and 2: "Men, we've got a decision to make. We've got the princess here. We're going to put her on this train. We can jump the train with her and go. In that case we will be safe, but she may be in danger. But if we want to ensure her safety, we'll put her on the train and we'll turn and fight. If we do that, I can promise you, we will slow down the bad guys long enough that she'll be safe. But, men, I can't promise you that we'll make it. So what's the choice?" They raised her sticks and yelled, "We fight, daddy!" Yes! So we destroyed much grass and tall weeds as we made our way back home moving into forced march mode, as I got more worried about making us late to this event which is getting closer.

As we pressed on, I ended up having to carry the youngest one. As I pressed us on faster and worried more about time, the story faded from my mind. I was simply trudging while carrying one child, watching another who was trailing behind. Then, out of the quiet my second son walking beside me, said matter-of-factly, "Daddy, I don't think I'm going to make it." I realized all of a sudden that he was still in character in the story. So I said, "Why is that, buddy?" Huffing and puffing, he said, "Well, I just don't think I'm going to make it. But if I don't make it, the worst thing is I won't get to see mama and baby again." Okay, I wanted to play along in the story. Then he said, "But daddy, if I don't make it, you tell mama it's okay because I'll see her again in heaven one day."

That struck my heart. Perseverance empowered by hope of the resurrection. I prayed silently, "Oh God, my boy is only playing, but he's handling great gospel truth right here. And would you

please take that truth deep into his heart so that when he is grown, he might also be willing to say it's worth it to lay it all on the line, to spend and be spent for the gospel because it will be okay because there is a resurrection?" I want to urge you, brothers, in light of the resurrection, it is worth it to lay it all on the line for the Lord. He sees you.

The Lord will vindicate your faithful labors. Take heart brothers. Your labor is not in vain. The Lord is with you. To quote Samuel Rutherford once again, "patience my beloved; Christ the King is coming home."⁶

May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. (Colossians 1:11-12)

*Previously published as "Encouragement for Pastors," at
God-CenteredLife.org, Dec 30, 2020.*

⁶ Rutherford, *Letters*, 54.

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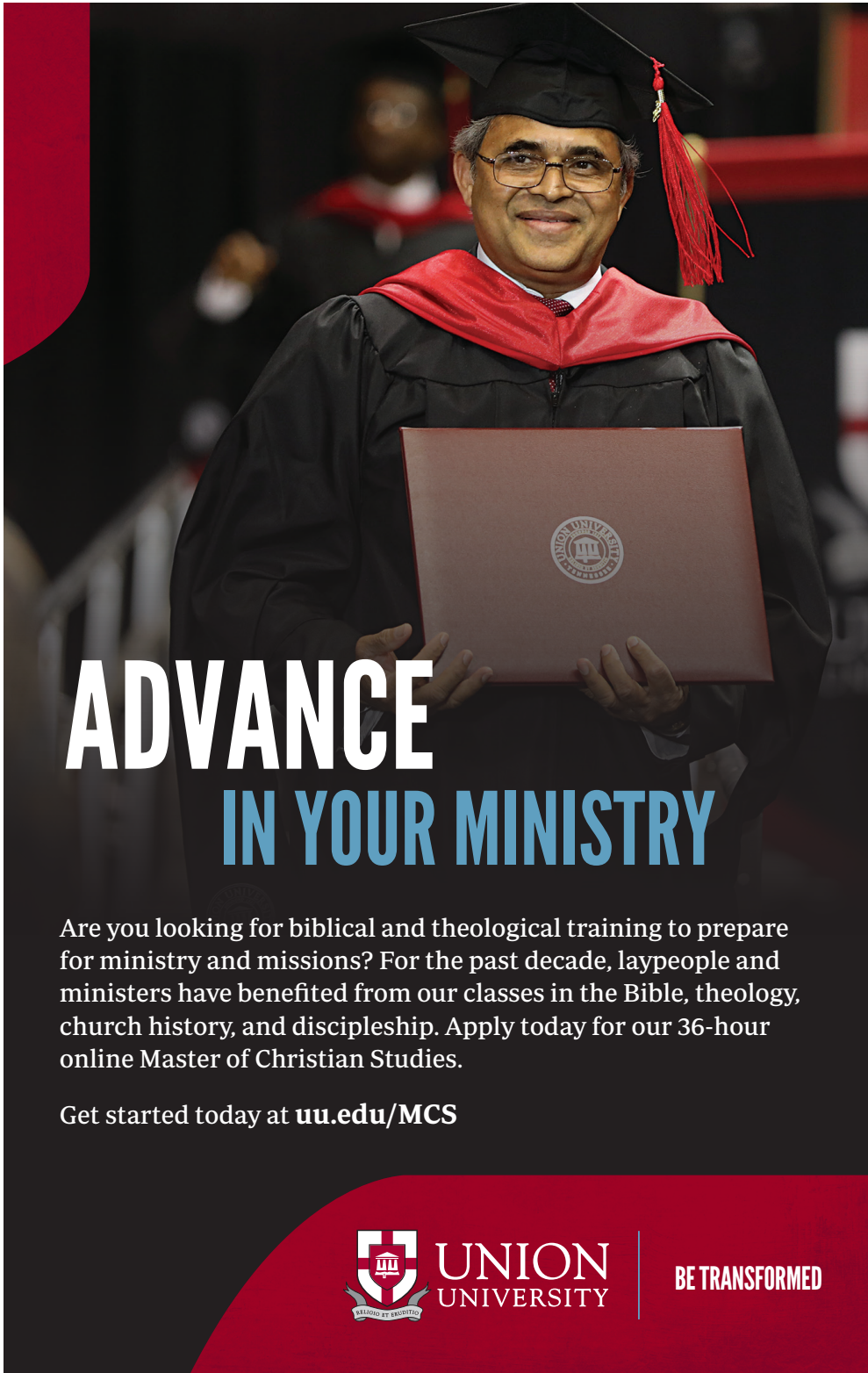
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