

In Times Like These

Rev. Philip Parker

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The year was 1943 and the world was at war. Our Armed Forces were bogged down in Italy. Casualty lists of soldiers wounded and killed were growing longer. Rationing at home was making life difficult at the grocery store. There was a growing sense of discouragement. Ruth Jones, a pastor's wife and mother of five, couldn't help but be reminded of what people in her husband's church were facing as she read 2 Timothy 3:1 during her daily devotions. It said, "In the last days perilous times shall come." Reflecting upon that verse of Scripture as she went about her household duties, words and a melody came to mind. A self-taught pianist, she took out a notepad from her apron pocket and composed a simple song that expressed how she and so many other people were thinking during those difficult days. Little did she realize that she had composed a song that millions of people would come to know and love, especially when George Beverly Shea sang it during the Billy Graham crusades. She herself said, "I can't believe I had any part in writing this song. I just feel that God gave it to me, and I gave it to the world." Ruth Jones had composed a song that still speaks to us today. It's called "In Times Like These."

Thinking of what is taking place in our world today as well as what we are facing during this time of transition in the life of our church, I couldn't help but be reminded of what Ruth Jones wrote so long ago. In fact, John Salley referred to this same passage of Scripture during his sermon last Sunday. We are, indeed, living in perilous times. The same was true thousands of years ago as Joshua and the people of Israel prepared to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. In many ways they were facing a situation similar to what we will be encountering in the days to come, a journey from what we have known for many years into a future that is at best uncertain. For that reason, beginning this Sunday and continuing for the next three weeks, let's take a look at the Old Testament book of Joshua. Hopefully we will learn some things that will guide us and perhaps even inspire us as we too journey into what we hope and pray will be a promised land of growth and spiritual vitality for our church. With that in mind, there are four things that I want to share with you from God's Word in today's passages of Scripture.

- 1. In times like these we need to reminisce, remember and grieve (Deuteronomy 34: 5-12).**

When a pastor retires after years of faithful service, his departure is in many ways like the loss of a loved one. It is therefore appropriate, even necessary, for our church family to reminisce and remember all of those special occasions and memories that are now a part of the past. They will become a treasured possession, but also one which at

times saddens our hearts. That is what the children of Israel experienced after the death of Moses. It is recorded that they mourned his passing for thirty days. They also remembered and passed on to future generations an account of his life and how he had led his people from slavery to freedom. Whether we like it or not, grief is a powerful emotion and we need to recognize its reality. When we lose someone, or even something that we highly value and love, we experience a sense of loss. Years ago I came to appreciate this truth when one of the members of our church nearly lost her home to a fire caused by a lightning strike. She was thankful that her home had been saved, but was still burdened by a profound feeling of sadness because she had almost lost a home which was filled with so many treasured memories from her past. So don't be surprised and despair if you feel a little down in the weeks and months to come. It's a very natural and normal emotional reaction. Our pastor whom we have known for many years is no longer leading us. As Paul was traveling to Jerusalem near the end of his earthly ministry, he stopped by the city of Ephesus and met with the elders of the church. He had spent over two years with them, teaching and training them in the Christian faith. It was a tear-stained meeting as the church's leaders realized that they would never see him again (Acts 20:36-38).

2. In times like these we need to patiently await the new leader that God will send to us (Deuteronomy 34:9).

For Israel this time of transition was an easy one. Joshua had already been serving as Moses' lieutenant. Just before his death, Moses empowered Joshua with the spiritual authority which had been granted unto him by God. Joshua was now the divinely appointed leader of Israel as they prepared to enter the Holy Land. Sometimes God moves very quickly to meet the needs of His people. That's what transpired when Moses turned over the reins of leadership to Joshua and sometimes that still happens. When I became the pastor of the church I served in Portsmouth Virginia, I was informed of a most unusual event which had taken place early in its history. The year was 1912 and the little church was in trouble. There was no money in the bank and no pastoral candidates to consider. The church family earnestly called for a season of prayer and in just one week the Lord sent them a pastor under whose leadership, the church became one of the fastest growing congregations in that city. For most churches, however, a time of pastoral transition is significantly longer. For example, it required two years before our church felt led of the Lord to call Reverend Salley as their next pastor. So whether it is long or short, our church family should be prepared to wait with a feeling of confident expectation, until God reveals the individual whom He has chosen to lead our congregation. Let us, therefore, rely upon the promise that God made to the people of Israel a long, long time ago. He said, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper' and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11). It took a while, 70 years, for those plans to be fulfilled, but in God's perfect timing they came to pass. The same is true for us. He will send us a new pastor. Hopefully, it will be a little sooner than later. Nevertheless, we must be willing to patiently wait and pray for the one whom the Lord will be sending to us.

3. In times like these we need to hold fast to God's Word (Joshua 1:8).

The Lord told Joshua and the people of Israel to focus their attention upon the Book of the Law that had been entrusted into their care. Then and only then could they be assured of success and prosperity as they entered the land that God had promised to give them. The same is true for us. Pastoral leaders come and go and things are always changing in the world around us. God's Word, the Bible, however, is a constant and consistent resource to which we can cling as we face the future. During the Vietnam War those who were imprisoned by the North Vietnamese wrote memorized verses of Scripture on toilet paper and shared these verses with one another. When that failed, they started tapping messages, including verses from the Bible to one another using a simplified Morse Code system that they devised. They knew that the Bible was a bedrock of strength and hope upon which they could rely during their imprisonment. As we have been reminded on numerous occasions, the Bible is not like any other book that has ever been written. It is filled with the very breath and presence of God. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul stressed the importance of being an avid student of the Scriptures. He knew that Timothy's reliance upon them would enable him to effectively live the Christian way of life (2 Timothy 3:14-17). The same is true for you and me. We need to be students of God's Word.

4. In times like these we need to be reminded that God is with us (Joshua 1:5 and 9).

He has neither deserted, nor abandoned us. That was the promise that the Lord reiterated in this opening chapter in the book of Joshua. He wanted to reassure the Israelites that He would be right there with them as they faced the challenge of making a new home for themselves in the land of Canaan. We too need to hear those same words and take them to heart as we prepare for the future. Unless we cling to the Lord and rest in the assurance of His protective love and watch care, this time of transition will be much more difficult. We will be tempted to allow feelings of uncertainty and anxiety to lead us astray. I am reminded of the multitude of biographies that have been written about some of the most influential Christians who have ever lived. Without exception each and every one of them lived their lives in the unmistakable assurance that the Lord was with them, even when they were facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Whether they were facing determined opposition, lack of resources, or at times physical harm, they never wavered in their absolute dependence upon the Lord. Indeed, that's what Paul wrote when he so vividly declared, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword....Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35-39). No matter what we must face during this time of transition, always remember that the Lord is with us, our refuge and our strength.

Yes, in times like these we need a Savior. In times like these we need an anchor. Be very sure, be very sure your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock.