Romans 12:12 *The Bible’s Guide to Life in Quarantine*

***The Newspaper in One Hand***There is a famous quote that most seminary students hear during their training to preach. **It goes:** “Preach with the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other.”

The idea is that as preachers we should show an awareness of the world our audience lives in. We want to be relevant to the things going on right now. If we only talk about how things were back in Biblical times, if we only talk about the world of Moses and David and Jesus, it can seem pretty distant to life in the 21st Century.

Some preachers take this advice and really run with it. Some preachers start nearly every sermon with the current events of the week and then turn to the Bible to help make sense of them. Some preachers are very good at this type of preaching.

I’m different. I tend to start with the Bible. I feel the Bible contains timeless teaching that remains relevant whatever our current events. My preaching schedule is put together out of a desire to teach a balanced perspective on the Bible; and from week to week I will make connections to current events as appropriate. I want to stay relevant, I want to help you connect the Bible to things going on in your life; but I try to let the Bible set the agenda of my preaching, not the headlines.

In fact, in my almost 25 years as a preacher, there is only one Sunday when I can remember setting aside what I was scheduled to preach in order to address a current event, and that was September 16, 2001—the Sunday immediately after 9/11. That was such a major event, such a life altering and scary time, it seemed there was no way we could have a church service without asking how the Bible spoke to that moment.

This seems to be another one of those times. I believe this Covid-19 outbreak, this period of social distancing, and the economic impact of it is going to be one of those generation defining moments in history. We’ll look back on this period the way many of us look back on 9/11; the way earlier generations looked back on WWII or the Great Depression. I imagine our children and grandchildren will, decades from now, be telling their children and grandchildren what life was like during the Great 2020 Quarantine.

And so, it seems only appropriate that I suspend my normal preaching schedule to ask what the Bible has to say **that is relevant to this moment.** For those of you who are sick of hearing about coronavirus, those of you hoping that church could give us a little break from all the news, I apologize. If this thing drags on—certainly as we get into Holy Week—I’ll go back to my typical style of preaching. But for now, coronavirus is on everybody’s mind, so we’ll continue to ask what the Bible has to say to our current situation.

And, of course, it has a lot to say.

***Romans 12:12***My text today is Romans 12:12. I actually “stumbled” on this verse as I was preparing last week’s sermon. I wanted Romans 12:15, the verse that tells us to “mourn with those who mourn;” but when I looked it up I thought it would be good to look at the context. I shared with you Romans 12:9-18; and then I pointed out that Romans 12:12 would make a pretty good verse for our consideration.

It’s so applicable, in fact, that Eileen Johnson, who does such a good job of updating the message on our church sign, put Romans 12:12 out there last Monday. And a local T-shirt shop used Romans 12 as the scripture reference for their Covid-19 t-shirts.

**Here’s what Romans 12:12** says:

**12**Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

I’m calling this sermon “The Bible’s Guide to life in Quarantine.” It seems to me that there is a lot of practical advice here for how we should approach the current situation. And the outline is pretty straightforward. There are three things we are being told to do. Three virtues we are being called to pursue. So that will be the outline: 1) Be joyful in hope, 2) be patient in affliction, and 3) be faithful in prayer. Very straightforward.

***One of These Things is not Like the Others***But before we get into the outline, there’s something I want to point out to you. In fact, I want to play the Sesame Street game “One of these things is not like the others.”

As we look at this verse, we’re going to notice there are 6 major words. 10 words total, but take out the “be” and the three occurrences of “in”, and we have 6 key words. 3 pairs of words, 6 major words in total: joyful, hope, patient, affliction, faithful and prayer. And one of these words is not like the others. One of these words sticks out like a sore thumb.

That word would be…**affliction.** Affliction is the unique word in this list. Joy, hope, patience, faithfulness, and prayer are all things we experience or do. We might say that those 5 are Christian virtues. They are things for us to pursue and strive for.

But affliction is not something we do; it is something that is done to us. Affliction is not a virtue. It’s not something we want. It’s something that happens.

So in this verse, affliction is the environment where everything else is supposed to be done. Affliction is the current state of affairs. Affliction is why, if you will, these virtues must be pursued.

In other words, affliction is the crisis we are in right now. Other translations have the word “tribulation” here, or “trouble,” or “hard times.” That’s our current situation. Hard times. Trouble. Worldwide crisis.

And I point it out because tribulation and trouble are normal and to be expected in this world. Affliction is where we live.

Sometimes we act shocked, simply shocked, when hard times come our way. Even now, there is a tendency to act like this current situation is the first time anybody has ever had to deal with a pandemic or a financial crisis. Our self-centeredness can lead us to believe that because this is now happening to us, it is without a doubt the worst thing that has ever, ever happened to anybody in the history of the world.

But, in fact, history tells us that plagues and pandemics are fairly common over the centuries. So are financial crises and soaring unemployment. So is war and famine and so on and so on. Large scale community crises are symptoms of living in a fallen world. As are individual trials. Whether you are now looking at a time of unemployment or a scary medical diagnosis or strains on your relationships—whether you are facing trials related to current events or you have challenges that are completely unrelated—that is normal.

Jesus said: “In this world you will have trouble…” (John 16:33). It’s not a maybe or a possibly or a “it could happen.” You will have trouble, it’s a given. Much of the Bible is written not to help us avoid affliction, but to help us deal with it when it comes.

I’ll say it again: affliction is a symptom of living in a fallen world. Affliction is actually the normal state of affairs the Bible tells us to expect.

Affliction is the setting for this verse. Affliction is where we live.

Now, how do we face it? What are we to do? Three things:

***Borrowing on Hope***First, **be joyful in hope**.

Be joyful. Even now, don’t let the current situation rob you of your joy. Hold on to your joy in Christ no matter what happens.

How do you do that? Does that mean you have to put on a plastic smile and act like things are great even when they are not great? If you’ve been laid off, or if you can’t go visit a loved one, or if you are starting to experience the symptoms of this illness, are you supposed to just grin and say it is all a blessing from God? Are you supposed to be joyful about stuff like that?

No, I don’t think so. Here’s where the “hope” part comes in. For Christians, we can always cling to joy because of our great hope. John Piper puts it like this:

[This] means that for the Christian things may go really bad right now and yet not rob him of his joy. The joy is the joy of hope. Christians set their hearts on how good it will be in the age to come and in the presence of Christ after death. This is why Christians can rejoice in tribulation and not just in health and peace and security. Tribulation drives the roots of joy down into hope. The future joy streams back into the presence and lightens every load. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/happy-in-hope-patient-in-pain-constant-in-prayer>

For Christians, it’s a matter of perspective. The situation you are currently in might not be so great; but we believe there is something better coming. We look forward in hope. And from that hope we can find the strength to be joyful, even when there is nothing to be immediately joyful about.

I think of it like this: the Bible tells us that there is an indescribable inheritance being stored up for us in heaven. An inheritance that can never perish, or spoil or fade away (1 Peter 1:4). A day is coming when we will be indescribably joyful around the throne of Christ. And we know this inheritance has been earned for us by Christ’s incredible, sacrificial love for us and by His triumphant victory over sin at the cross and the empty tomb.

It is as though we all have this retirement account of joy stored up for us in this bank account called “Hope.”

Now, typically, financial advisors will tell you that you should not borrow against your retirement. If you have money put away for your golden years, you shouldn’t be dipping into it for use right now. If you do that, you are just setting yourself up for pain later on.

But in this case, we are being told that we can borrow against our inheritance of joy all we want. We can dip into that bank account called Hope whenever we need to. Whenever we run into a situation that threatens to steal our joy, whenever we are tempted to get depressed or discouraged because things are not good right now, we are can draw down on our future joy. Because that future joy is inexhaustible. Because that future joy is unlimited. Because that future joy is so spectacular we can start living on it right now.

I’ve been thinking about the story of Admiral Jim Stockdale this week. I learned about Stockdale’s story in the Jim Collins book “Good to Great.” Collins wrote about something he called “the Stockdale Paradox.”

Admiral Jim Stockdale was the highest ranked American to be held Prisoner of War during the Vietnam conflict. He spent 8 years at the infamous “Hanoi Hilton” where he experienced and witnessed all sorts of torture and atrocities. Not only did he need to endure his own imprisonment, but as the highest ranking officer he was responsible for the morale of all the other American P.O.W’s, doing everything he could to create conditions that would increase the number of prisoners who would survive unbroken, while fighting an internal war against his captors and their attempts to use the prisoners for propaganda.

When Collins interviewed him years later, he asked him how he endured:

“I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which in retrospect, I would not trade.”

Then Collins asked him: “Who didn’t make it out?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” he said. “The optimists.”

“The optimists? I don’t understand,” I said, now completely confused given what he’d said earlier.

“The optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart. This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end–-which you can never afford to lose–-with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.” <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-stockdale-paradox_b_5897ca82e4b02bbb1816bc38>

This is what Collins coined as the Stockdale Paradox: Never lose hope that there is something better coming even as you confront the most brutal facts of your current situation.

That’s what I think it means to be joyful in hope, even in the midst of affliction. We can borrow against our future joy, knowing that we have much joy to look forward to. But that doesn’t mean we have to put on plastic smiles and pretend everything is great right now when it ain’t.

We can confront our current reality even as we hang on to the end of the story that we know has already been written.

***Grace and Good Humor***Second, **be patient in affliction.**

Be patient. Especially now, we need deep reserves of patience.

This year our community Lenten Lunches were talking about the Fruit of the Spirit. I was scheduled to speak on the first Wednesday that got cancelled. Ironically, my topic was going to be patience.

My definition of patience is: “the prolonged restraint of anger or agitation.” Patience implies that you have the right to be angry or upset, but that you choose to restrain yourself.

The Bible says that love is “not easily angered” and I think that’s a pretty good definition of patience as well. It is “long-suffering.” It is “forbearance.” When something happens that bugs you or annoys you are even makes you angry, but you forbear. You restrain yourself.

Sometimes we think of patience as a passive activity. Like being patient means you just wait out the unpleasantness. We think of being patient as being, essentially, a victim. Like there’s nothing you can do, so you just have to put up with it.

But actually, the word Paul is using here is much tougher than that. It’s the kind of word that means “remaining instead of fleeing.” The kind of word you would use to encourage a soldier to stand his ground, to hold out, to endure in trouble, affliction, and persecution. In other words, patience is not weak, it’s strong. It takes great strength to be a patient person.

And we need patience right now, don’t we?

I think of all of you who are attempting to work at home, especially if you have kids at home. I think of all you kids who never thought you’d miss going to school, but suddenly find yourself stuck at home with no freedom to visit your friends and very little to do. I think of those of you who have been told your job is on hold, and you’re not even sure it will be there when this is all over. I think of everyone who is looking for certain essential supplies, only to find they’re just not available. I think of those of you who live alone, or live at a care facility, who are suddenly isolated and cut off from most forms of human contact. And the list could go on…

There’s so much to be angered or agitated by right now. There is so much to be irritated and exasperated by. I feel it. I’ve found myself snapping at Beth for no good reason. I’ve found myself lying awake at night, feeling a general sense of stress and anxiety, but not even sure what it was that I was stressed out about. We need to practice patience right now. We need strength to be patient.

So let me challenge you to be patient in two specific ways: for one thing, show each other **grace.** In your families, in your marriages, especially where you find yourself spending a lot more time together than you are used to, be gracious. Forgive each other quickly and freely. Choose to overlook as many irritations as you can. Recognize that you are going to get on one another’s nerves, and choose to give grace.

More than that, be gracious to yourself as well. A lot of us are not nearly as productive as we are used to being. You might find yourself thinking you should be getting stuff accomplished, only to remember that you’re being forced to work from home. This nationally enforced slow-down is going to leave a lot of us feeling like we aren’t doing enough. Cut yourself a break. Allow yourself a chance to just be.

And second, patience requires **good humor**. I said earlier that being joyful in hope does not require us to put on fake smiles in the midst of bad circumstances. God doesn’t expect us to call good something that is not good. I’m not asking you to be fake.

But patience does require good humor. A situation like this does call for us to be able to laugh at ourselves, and to laugh at the absurdity of some of the things we are doing and experiencing. Please, please, please keep your sense of humor through all of this. Keep laughing

Patience may feel in short supply right now. But fight for patience. Be patient with one another. Be patient with yourself. Be patient as we wait for life to get back to normal.

***Constantly Praying***Then, third, be **faithful in prayer.**

During this time of enforced slow-down and social distancing we can do nothing less than pray. Use this time to call on the Lord.

Different translations have this word, “faithful”, several ways. Be constant in prayer. Keep on praying. Continue in prayer. The impression could be that we are being called to “always be praying” or, as 1 Thessalonians 4:18 says “pray continually.”

John Piper writes this:

The word “constant” here doesn’t mean that every minute you are praying. It means persist in prayer. Persevere in it. Stay at it. Be devoted to it. Don’t give up or slack off. Be habitual. It’s the opposite of random, occasional, sporadic, intermittent. In other words, Paul is calling all Christians to make prayer a regular, habitual, recurring, disciplined part of your life. Treat prayer the way you treat eating and sleeping and doing your job. Don’t be hit and miss about it. Don’t assume it will fill in the cracks of other things. Dealing with God in prayer deserves more than a dial-up on the fly.

He is, of course, available any time. And he loves to help any time. But he is dishonored when we do not make time in our day to give him focused attention. All relationships suffer without regular focused attention. Paul is calling all of us to a life of regular, planned meetings with God in prayer in which we praise him for who he is, and thank him for what he has done, and ask him for help, and plead the cause of those we love, including the peoples of the world. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/be-constant-in-prayer-for-the-joy-of-hope>

Now, as much as ever, we must be active in the cause of prayer.

* Pray for our congregation, our community, our country, and all the countries of the world.
* Pray for those who are sick, pray for those who may become sick, pray for those who are caring for the sick.
* Pray for those who have lost their jobs, and pray for those businesses that have had to temporarily shut their doors.
* Pray for our leaders: our school board and our mayor and our governor and the President and all those who must listen to the advice of the scientists and other experts and then make decisions on when things can change.
* Pray for the scientists and the researchers who are tracking the virus and seeking the best course of treatment for those who are sick as well as vaccines and other preventative measures.
* Pray for people everywhere to use this time to take stock of their lives and to have the opportunity to look to God and hear the good news of Jesus. Pray that people will find that the only true hope, and thus the only true joy, is found in a relationship with Jesus.

Praying, of course, is something we can and should be doing by ourselves. Hopefully you have seen the invitation of the Spencer Ministerial Association to use this weekend as a time of fasting and prayer. If you haven’t yet, I encourage you to skip a meal in the next day or two and use those physical signals of hunger as a cue to turn to God. Personally, I’ll be skipping breakfast and lunch tomorrow and spending time in prayer.

I also want to remind you, if you haven’t already, to set your alarms for 7:00pm every day. 7:00 is 1900 hours in military time. 19 for Covid-19. Set your alarm on your phone and when it goes off, use it as a prompt to pray.

We are also seeking ways to pray with and for one another during this time of social isolation. It is a tremendous mercy of God that we have the communication devices we have—phones and the internet. We have scheduled a prayer meeting via the videoconferencing app Zoom for Tuesday at 3:30 and Wednesday at 7:00. Any are welcome to join. And if you are having trouble with Zoom, please feel free to call the church and we’ll see if we can help get you set up.

A time of affliction like this should lead us back to the Lord.

So here, in Romans 12:12 we get the Bible’s guide to life during quarantine:

* Be joyful in hope,
* Be patient in affliction,
* Be faithful in prayer.