

Title: The Roller Coaster of Life

Text: Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8 “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”

2 Corinthians 12: 1-10 “...but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness’.”

Theme: Faithfulness

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### Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 NRSV

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: <sup>2</sup>a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; <sup>3</sup>a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; <sup>4</sup>a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; <sup>5</sup>a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; <sup>6</sup>a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; <sup>7</sup>a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; <sup>8</sup>a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

### 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 NRSV

It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. <sup>2</sup>I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. <sup>3</sup>And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—<sup>4</sup>was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. <sup>5</sup>On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. <sup>6</sup>But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, <sup>7</sup>even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. <sup>8</sup>Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, <sup>9</sup>but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. <sup>10</sup>Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. <sup>1</sup>

This is the word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

Two friends, one an Optimist and the other a Pessimist, could never quite agree. One day the Optimist decided he had found a good way to pull his friend out of his continual Pessimistic thinking.

The Optimist owned a hunting dog that could walk on water. He decided to take the Pessimist and the dog out duck hunting in a boat.

They got out into the middle of the lake, and the Optimist brought down a duck. The dog immediately jumped out of the boat, walked out across the water, retrieved the duck, and walked back to the boat.

The Optimist thought his friend just had to look at that and be amazed and upward thinking. Instead, the Pessimist looked at it all and said, “That dog can’t swim!”<sup>2</sup>

What’s your outlook on life? Are you a glass-half-empty pessimist. You look at circumstances and life events and conclude that life is going not-so-well, and probably the best days are behind you. If graphed on a chart, the pessimist’s view of life is a straight line oriented downward through time.

Or maybe you’re a glass – half – full person. You look at life events and conclude optimistically that life is good and getting better, and the best days are yet to come. Graphed on a chart, this is a straight line oriented upward through time.

Which are you? The optimist or the pessimist? Or are you neither? What we learn through the scriptures today is that whatever life throws at you, God sends grace sufficient for our need to be carried through it all successfully.

## **The Ups**

There are high points in life. Paul had his high points. He mentions some of them here. “I know a man ...” he writes. Paul is being humble, but actually there is little doubt he is writing of himself. “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the

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<sup>2</sup> Online reference accessed November 9, 2011 (adapted) : <http://www.backwoodshome.com/humor/jokes86.html>

third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows.” Commentator Norman Hillyer states here that the ... “Third heaven ... is a Jewish expression for the immediate presence of God, and for Paul (it is) a phrase to convey the idea of the most sublime blessedness.”

Paul goes on to write “And I know that this man was caught up into paradise ...” Our translation – Heaven. He “... heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.” Whatever that was, it was major. Paul had a mountain top experience.

Mountain top experiences happen: births, weddings, graduations, time at church camp, on trips, at retreats, in prayer, at seminars, at leadership or teaching experiences. Little Colton Burpo, two months short of his 4<sup>th</sup> birthday, had a near death experience while at the hospital. God took him to heaven for a little bit and showed him around. The book *Heaven Is For Real*, written by his father, Todd, tells all about it. God can touch us in profound ways at special times so that our spiritual batteries are not only renewed but sometimes switched out to whole new power sources.

- Have you had a mountaintop experience?
- Have you been touched in a special and holy way by God?
- Have you been renewed or restored or reshaped in a sacred way through some mountaintop experience?
- If not, that’s OK. If so, perhaps this is a time to re-claim it.
- We don’t create these mountaintop experiences when they happen. They aren’t of human origin. All we can do is receive them when they happen, and respond in a godly, thoughtful, heart-filled way.
- And if we want to graph a mountaintop experience, that’s a rising line, isn’t it?

## **The Downs**

But Paul had not only mountain top experiences. He also had low periods. The graphic representation is a descending line.

Verse 7 “So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

The great Paul, Apostle, evangelist, had a thorn in the flesh. Some have speculated that it may have been some kind of eye condition. After all, at the end of Galatians he writes, “See what large letters I am writing in my own hand.” Perhaps he had an annoying eye condition that made it hard to write and hard to see. Whatever that thorn in the flesh was, he prayed three times that it be removed. Was it removed? No. God had a different answer: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’.” Not, my healing of your eyes is sufficient for you. My grace is sufficient.

We have thorns-in-the-flesh. Medical conditions. Aches. Pains. I’ve been dealing recently with a pair of inflamed ulcerated corneas. I had it several months back, and it healed. But the condition is back. Once in the 1980’s when I served as a Chaplain with Marines out at Camp Lejeune, I developed a sore foot running. Memo to self: “Don’t try to keep up with Marines, it won’t work.” Anyway, I went to the foot doctor and asked, “Why is my foot aching?” He asked me when I was born. I said 1951. He said, “I defy you to go out and find an automobile made in 1951 with all parts working perfectly.” Good point.

From the Centers for Disease Control:<sup>3</sup>

#### Top Causes of Death

- Heart disease
- Cancer
- Stroke
- Respiratory infection
- Accidents
- Alzheimer’s
- Diabetes

Disease and illness and injury continue to take their toll. My own grandmother used to say, “You’ve gotta die of something.” I think of Solomon the writer of Ecclesiastes who wrote that for everything there is a season and a time for all matters under heaven. Birth, death, war, peace, everything happens in a kind of cycle. Many of these we can anticipate and expect. The Hebrew way to graph life is in circles.

## **Learning to Thrive Through It All**

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<sup>3</sup> Online reference accessed Nov 9 2011: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/lcod.htm>

Years ago Gail and I went to a concert in northwest Iowa. Joni Earickson Tada was the singer. What a tremendous Christian witness. Joni suffered a spinal cord injury in 1967 from a diving accident. A quadriplegic, she became angry at God. But she changed, through a friend's counseling, through people praying for her, and through reflection on Romans 8:28 "All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose." Joni Earickson Tada, the young lady angry at God, turned out to be an inspiring person of faith, a singer, an artist, an author, a radio host, and an advocate for the disabled. Though her body is limited, her spirit soars. The disabled have much to teach us. Joni teaches us to learn to thrive through it all.

Life isn't graphed as a straight line upward, is it? And it isn't graphed as a straight line downward. Sometimes life's a circle, like the Hebrew way of thinking. Sometimes we experience life as a roller coaster, going up some days, and going down other days. None of us are spared difficulties. And none of us are kept from mountaintop experiences. The good news is that through it all, as in the case of the Apostle Paul, grace is there for us. God's grace is sufficient for us. Grace is there when the roller coaster is going up, and grace is there when the roller coaster is going down.

### **Three Questions**

I have three closing questions for you.

1. Do you have the capacity to see blessing when others see only pain or sorrow or loss? I ask because I believe there is blessing in everything if we are willing to see it.
2. Do you have the capacity to recognize grace in both the highs and lows of life? I ask because I believe grace, like blessing, is in every day.
3. Since Paul prayed and prayed and the answer he got was grace, not a healing of his thorn-in-the-flesh, my question is: can you accept grace as the answer to your prayers?

Let's be people who have learned to let God's grace carry us in every situation without exception.