

Brotherhood - The Fellowship of the Cross

Introduction: Psalm 133

Prayer

Sermon:

*The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began,
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with eager feet,
Until it joins some larger way
Where many paths and errands meet.
And whither then? I cannot say.*

The hobbit Bilbo Baggins has left his home once again, singing a bit of this song as he goes, waving farewell to Gandalf the wizard, leaving young Frodo Baggins, his adopted son, with a perilous Ring of great power.

How many of you have read or seen The Lord of the Rings? You should. If you haven't, don't worry, I'll summarize it for you in a second.

I'm speaking on our relationships as brothers in Christ – truly I will – but I bring up the Lord of the Rings because I think the story told in this Trilogy of books serves as a metaphor for our lives, individually and corporately, and it is replete with examples of brotherhood.

The lines I read to you are indicative of the essence of this story. It's a story about a long, long journey. Frodo Baggins has possession of a golden ring that is sought after by Sauron, the Dark Lord, and one who must represent Satan. The ring gives great power, only anyone who uses it will ultimately be corrupted by its power. Only Frodo, a small hobbit, can be entrusted with it. He's never even left the Shire, and yet he is set on a journey across the known world to destroy the Ring by casting it into a volcano located in Mordor, the realm of Sauron. He knows the purpose of his journey, and yet he knows not what he will face along the way.

We also are on a journey. Scripture so often refers to our lives as a walk. We are told to walk in His ways, that the Word is a lamp unto our feet (which are doing what? Walking!). The apostle Paul tells us to "press on toward the goal to win the prize to which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 3:14). We are moving. We have a goal. There is no standing still.

What is it we are moving toward, what is it we seek? While there may be many ways to state it, I like the way C.S. Lewis says it: We want to emerge from the shadowlands and see all creation set right. We want to get Home. We want everything to be as God intended, to see the curse of sin undone. We want to be with the One who loves us, Jesus. Don't you know this longing?

Even on the best of days, I know this to be the case. I look in on my children, sleeping peacefully in their beds. That's a sight to fill me with joy. And yet, there is sorrow mixed with joy – knowing that they will grow up and leave, that they too will face difficulties in life, and disappointments, and sorrow. Or I've had a particularly golden moment, or hour, or even a day, and I think "it doesn't get any better than this", and then some bit of sadness intrudes and I realize that every joy is mixed with sorrow. All is not well with the world.

When Frodo finds that the Ring will be his burden to bear, he turns to Gandalf and says: "I wish the Ring had never come to me. I am not made for perilous quests. I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?" And Gandalf says: "Such questions cannot be answered. . . . But you have been chosen, and you must use such strength and heart and wits as you have." He lays a hand on Frodo's shoulder and says: "I will help you bear this burden, as long as it is yours to bear."

This conversation points out something we have no doubt all experienced – that we are alone in our unique life experiences, and yet, by God's grace, not entirely alone. For us, it may be an overwhelming sense of personal failure, a besetting sin, a difficult marriage, loss of job, poor health, or whatever. God has given us our own trials. Our aloneness forces us to look to Him and trust Him; yet, by His grace he gives us brothers in Christ to encourage us along the journey.

Frodo was given a fellowship to accompany him on his journey – his loyal gardener Sam, two other hobbits (Merry and Pippin), two men, one dwarf, one elf, and Gandalf – yet none could carry the Ring. None could fully bear his burden for him. And yet, there was much they could do for one another and for him. So can we do for our fellow travelers.

First, we need to recognize that our brothers in Christ are a gift to us. There's no method for gaining this type of fellowship. It is *given*. Much as Frodo didn't choose his companions on his journey, we really don't choose ours. But we can be open to them, and if we feel we have none, we can pray for one – just one will do.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 contains these well known verses:

*Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work:
If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls*

down and has no one to help him up! . . . Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

Do you have a friend to help you up when you stumble? Is there someone who can stand with you so that you are not overpowered by whatever trial comes your way? If not, pray for one. If so, be thankful for them and let them know you are thankful

You know, I can't pretend that I'll know most or even many of you in this way – with this deep brotherly kind of love. It's really something beyond me to make happen. But I know I need to be open to what companions on my journey God would provide. Be thankful. Be open to God's gifts. Pray for brothers to walk with you. Be such a brother.

Second, though it's not exhaustive, here are some thoughts on what brothers do for one another. For one thing, *we help carry burdens*. In Galatians, Paul exhorts us to “carry each others burdens.” How can we do that? First, we need to know about it. We can't carry a burden we know nothing of. Let it be known. It may be macho, it may be American, but it's not Christian to refuse to let your brothers in Christ know the burden you carry. Tell someone.

Well then, how do we carry the burden? Well, we might simply stand alongside our brother. Consistently being there and available is one of my best experiences of having a brother in Christ. If it's a material need, seek to meet it or find someone who can. If it's spiritual or emotional, listen to them, pray with them, stay in close contact with them. You know, we like to fix things, but most of these things aren't fixable in the human sense. It takes time and commitment to one another.

Brothers also *encourage one another*. Hebrews 4:13 says to “encourage one another *daily*. Daily. Do we do that? Often I forget – my encouragement is not sustained. Oswald Sanders wrote a book called *Spiritual Leadership* in which he said that the single most important thing leaders need to focus on beyond their own nurturing of a relationship with the Lord is the ministry of encouragement.

Just before Frodo and his companions enter the Mines of Moria, a dreadfully fearful place, Gimli the dwarf reaffirms his support for Gandalf. Gandalf is the leader of the group, the most capable, and yet he has failed to lead them successfully and fears entering Moria, with good reason. He needs encouragement. Gimli says: “I will tread the paths with you Gandalf!” And Gandalf says: “Good Gimli. You encourage me. We will seek the hidden door together.” That encouragement was enough to help Gandalf press on.

One means of encouragement is simply to go with your brother. If he goes to the hospital, you go. To court; you go. To a difficult or intimidating meeting; you go. All this I have had done for me. And it is greatly encouraging to have a friend simply go with you. Your very presence will lend courage.

Brothers are loyal. David had Jonathan. Moses had Aaron. Paul had Luke. Frodo had Sam, a not particularly bright or brave friend, but a trustworthy and loyal one. As the son of King Saul, Jonathan had a rightful claim to the throne. He didn't. He supported David and always did. Aaron went with Moses to confront the man who was then the most powerful man in the world. When he was awaiting trial, Paul had Luke, when others had deserted him. When Frodo determined to carry his burden alone, leaving the fellowship behind, Sam refused to leave him.

What about you? Who shares your journey with you? Whose burden will you help carry? Are you an encourager? Are you a loyal and trustworthy friend?

Let's put this in context. Look at what lies at the end of our road. It's not just that we have this temporal gift of fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ. No, this gift is the down payment on a fellowship with brothers that we will enjoy for eternity. This is dress rehearsal for the great play that goes on forever – a time when we know Christ face to face *and* know our brothers in Christ, when all pretenses, hypocrisy, vain conceit and selfish ambition are gone, when all this is wrong with our relationships is undone.

There is a beautiful picture of this at the end of the Lord of the Rings, one that is evocative of the visions at the end of Revelation:

Gandalf stood before him, robed in white, his beard now gleaming like pure snow in the twinkling of the leafy sunlight. Well, Master Samwise, how do you feel? he said.

But Sam lay back, and stared with open mouth, and for a moment, between bewilderment and great joy, he could not answer. At last he gasped: Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue? What's happening to the world?

A great Shadow has departed, said Gandalf, and then he laughed, and the sound was like music, or like water in a parched land; and as he listened the thought came to Sam that he had not heard laughter, the pure sound of merriment, for days upon days without count. It fell upon his ears like the echo of all the joys he had ever known. But he himself burst into tears. Then, as a sweet rain will pass down a wind of Spring and the sun will shine out the

clearer, his tears ceased, and his laughter welled up, and laughing he sprang from his bed.

How do I feel? he cried. Well, I don't know how to say it. I feel, I feel he waved his arms in the air I feel like spring after winter, and the sun on the leaves, and like trumpets and harps and all the songs I have ever heard!

The King has tended you, and now he awaits you. You shall eat and drink with him. When you are ready I will lead you to him.

And when Sam heard that he laughed aloud for sheer delight, and he stood up and cried: O great glory and splendor! And all my wishes have come true! And then he wept.

And all the host laughed and wept, and in the midst of their merriment and tears the clear voice of the minstrel rose like silver and gold, and all men were hushed. . . and their joy was like swords, and they passed in thought out to regions where pain and delight flow together and tears are the very wine of blessedness.

Wow. It's no mistake that Heaven is described as the Holy City – cities are places of lots of people. The people of God will be with God and with each other in a way we cannot fully appreciate now.

This weekend we've heard a lot about relationships – with God, with co-workers, with family members, and with each other. Much is broken. Much needs healing.

Is everything sad going to come untrue? Yes, thank God, yes.