

The Neverending Story

Introduction:

How many of you have seen the movie “The Neverending Story?” It was one of my favorite from childhood; I loved the idea of the boy actually getting to enter the adventure that he was reading and experiencing all of the excitement and danger of that world. The title for my sermon today is “The Neverending Story,” and to be honest, it has nothing to do with the movie or book. I tried to make it work and it didn’t, so I just stole the name. But we are going to be talking about a kind of Neverending Story: the story of God and of our faith.

The capstone of our passage today comes from vs. 12, in which Paul writes, *“Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”* Paul’s point is that we must continue to work through our own salvation, to pursue discipleship, with reverence for the God who created and calls us.

I want to take a moment to focus on one word of this passage, “continue.” What does Paul mean by continue? Webster’s dictionary online defines this as meaning, “To maintain without interruption a condition, course, or action.”

This “course or action” that Paul speaks about is the faith journey that we enter into when we claim Jesus Christ to be our Lord and Savior. Paul is encouraging believers to continue exploring their faith.

Wolfram Math World defines a line as “a one-dimensional figure having no thickness which extends endlessly in both directions.” For our purposes, we will say that this line “continues endlessly.”

A ray, is a line that begins with a point and continues endlessly in one direction.

Now, what do math definitions have to do with anything spiritual?

God is a line. He continues forever in any direction and has no beginning or end. Christians are like a ray; we have a beginning point, the point in which we decide to claim Jesus Christ as our Lord. And from that point, we continue on forever, running parallel to God, receiving his love and glorifying his name.

Merriam Webster online defines an event as “something that happens” or an “occurrence.” It also gives other synonyms such as “incident, episode, circumstance.” The word “event” implies something that occurs one time; it is annual, it happens and then is done.

We should think about our own faith or salvation in terms of a ray. We recognize that we’ve made a decision that has endless repercussions, the most prominent being an eternity in heaven with God. However, I think the way that we carry out our faith and salvation often is more like an event than a ray. We think back fondly to our decision for Christ and our baptism, but forget that Christianity is a daily journey that we pursue through prayer, reading, meditation, worship, etc.

In our passage today, Paul talks about our “ray” of faith, and explicitly encourages the sections of line beyond the initial point. (emphasize the line coming from the ray.) But Paul does not make his ultimate point up front; instead, he reaches his conclusion like a detective, starting with exploring clues and linking facts which lead to new discoveries and finally to the overall picture. So like a good episode of “Psych” or

“Law and Order,” we’re going to start by following the lead of Paul until we reach the big finale and final wrap-up.

Transition: So first, we are going to explore verses 1-4.

1-4:

In the first few verses, Paul begins to set the stage for his argument, saying to the Philippians, “Hey, is there anything good at all that you get out of being a part of the church? Do you enjoy being in this fellowship? Do you receive comfort, compassion, or tenderness from anybody?” He assumes that the answer is “yes,” and I would say that, being part of the church, these are all things that we should be experiencing. He then continues by saying, since you are privy to some of these benefits of being in the church; let me ask you a favor. And then he hits them with a one-two punch. Verses 3 and 4 say, *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”* Now, whenever I’m asked to do a favor for anybody, it’s never been that big of a deal. Could you call this person for me? Could you get some water for me? Typically, they are things that I have no problem doing and am happy to oblige. So, I’m curious as to how the church at Philippi felt when Paul made this request of them. If it was me, and by the way, it is me because I believe that Paul is speaking a truth that still applies today, this favor would’ve knocked me down flat. You want me to what Paul? I’m supposed to do nothing in my own interest but value all people above myself? I’m not so sure that’s even possible. And I’m only a mildly selfish person.

What was it that Paul was hoping to accomplish through this? **Unity.** He says to them, if you have any joy from the church, then make my joy complete by working towards unity.

How on earth were they expected to accomplish this? Again, in verses 3 and 4 he lays out a basic prescription for unity within the church. If people are truly going to be able to gather together under Christ, then they must be united in heart and mind. This cannot happen within the context of our own human selfishness. We are far too prideful to compromise our own convictions and beliefs for the sake of others. Paul says that, instead, we have to view others as greater than ourselves. If we can put the interests of others ahead of our own, then we can truly take real steps towards complete unity.

The question then becomes **why?** Why Paul, should we as a church do this? It's not that we don't want you to be joyful. But you are asking an awful lot of us right now.

I would say that this is a fair question; after all, our human sensibilities really only allow us to sacrifice so much of ourselves before we start to feel uncomfortable with it, or better yet, before we start to think that it's becoming unfair.

Transition: Paul answers this question, and it's not just so that he may feel complete joy. Rather, he gives the Philippians the example of Jesus Christ as his reason. In verses 5-11, a passage of which many scholars believe to be a hymn written by Paul and one of his greatest Christological (meaning the understanding of Christ) accomplishments.

5-11:

So, **why** should we hold other's interests above our own? Paul tells us that in verses 5-7 that, *"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant."*

Because Christ humbled himself before us, we are to follow suit and humble ourselves before others. Jesus didn't live a life of servitude just for kicks; He is a God of love, and treated the world as such. Because we claim Him as our Lord, we are called to be like Him. Christ, then, lived a life of humility to serve as an example for how we are supposed to live.

And so in striving for unity amongst ourselves by caring for others interests before our own, we are honoring the sacrifice that He made for us and glorifying His name throughout the world by showing them the true joy and life that comes through knowing and following God.

Transition: How then, do we respond to this example of humility through death on the cross given to us by Jesus? This is Paul's big finale, the conclusion in which Scooby Doo pulls the mask off of the ghost to reveal that it's just a person underneath. We return to the capstone verse that I talked about at the beginning of the sermon, vs. 12.

"Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling"

12-13:

So our response to Christ's example is that we continue to work out our salvation, to work through our own faith journeys, so that we can draw closer and closer to becoming like Christ. This is the ray that we talked about earlier. Our faith journeys have a point, the event in which we decided to make Christ the Lord of our life, but then they continue onward forever in line with God. Our Christian lives are the never ending stories.

Paul adds an interesting qualifier to how we should be working out our salvation. He says that we should do it with fear and trembling. Fear and trembling. I don't know about you, but my picture of God does not often involve fear. Our worship music does not promote this sort of attitude towards God. We sing "I am a friend of God," not "I am afraid of God."

We recognize the awesome power and might of God, but I don't think we realize how terrifying that really can be. The being that brought the world into existence could so easily destroy it. And though God is love, he also has wrath, which contrary to popular belief happens in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. If you don't believe me, look in Acts for the story of Ananias and Sapphira. God doesn't always play nice.

What is it that Paul is trying to get his readers to understand by naming the terms "fear and trembling?"

The answer can be found in *Hebrews 12:18-29*: In this passage, the author talks about two mountains of God. The first cannot be touched because it burns with fire, filled with darkness, the sight of which caused Moses to tremble with fear. The second is Zion, the place of

God filled with joy. Beginning with vs. 26., the author gives us the powerful words of God.

At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." ²⁷ The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our "God is a consuming fire."

In this vision, we see both the terrible and joyful powers of God. And we are commanded to worship before Him with reverence and awe. "Fear and trembling" doesn't mean that we are to live scared and timid before God; it means that we are to treat Him with the respect and awe He deserves.

Conclusion:

So what does it look like to continue to work out our salvation with fear and trembling? I know that it helps me to have a tangible example of what a life of this sort looks like, something that I can look to for guidance. Yesterday I had the privilege of attending Howard Schmitt's funeral at South Union. There was a time during the service for "remembrances," during which family and friends came forward and spoke about Howard, what he was like, and their time with them. What an amazing testimony to his life. The themes that were shared over and over again were that Howard was determined to love and minister to others in the same way that Christ did. This was evident throughout his fifty plus years in ministry; I mean, he retired, and then

he started working as the part-time pastor at South Union. Now, when people retire from a career, they usually stop working in that same career. And yet here was Howard, 77, unable to leave ministry because of his passion for the work of God.

During the service, a song was shared that I think really echoes the message that Paul is giving us today. To be quite honest, I have not been a huge fan of this song. It's not my style of music, and I often thought of it as being hokey. It's called "Thank You" by Ray Boltz. It tells the story of a man who goes to heaven and is confronted by all of the people that he helped while he was on earth: a kid in his Sunday school class, somebody affected by a missionary that he supported, etc. As the song played, I imagined Howard entering into heaven and seeing all of the many people that he'd touched in his life. I imagined the joy that he is experiencing at receiving the reward for a race well ran.

And as I reflect on my own life, I hope and pray that I can be as good of a man as Howard.

Now, the only reason that so many people attended his memorial celebration and had so many good things to share is because Howard spent his life, working with diligence and patience, on his salvation. Howard didn't make excuses for why he was too busy to serve and love others, to share the gospel of Christ. His faith was a "ray," not an "event."

Application:

So, how do we live our lives like "rays?" One day at a time (place dots on the ray). Every day we have the opportunity to work out our salvation, through prayer, Scripture, worship, service, evangelism. For

all of you it will be different. Maybe this week, you will decide to pray each day you wake up before you get out of bed. Maybe you will read through a gospel book this week or the New Testament this month. Maybe you will finally work up the nerve to strike up a spiritual conversation with your friends at work. Maybe you will spend more of the day in the awareness and presence of God. Whatever you decide to do, remember that there are new spiritual prospects for you every day. Don't be discouraged if you have bad days. Remember that faith is a life long journey.