

10 Years After Tragic Death of 19-Year-Old Son, Pastor Offers Hope, Wisdom

“It is because of hope that you suffer. It is through hope that you’ll change things.” –Maxime Lagace

It is every parent’s worst nightmare. Unexpectedly, in the middle of a perfectly normal day, you are contacted and told that your teenager has been in a tragic automobile accident and is approaching death.

Over 10 years ago, Steve and Sarah Berger who serve together in overseeing Grace Chapel, one of the most vibrant and influential churches in the Nashville area, were plunged into this traumatic experience. Not long afterward, their 19-year-old son, Josiah, a committed Christian, entered into the presence of the living God he loved and served.

The Bergers posted this message for all to read: “Sarah and I wish to thank everyone for your unequalled love and support. We have fought the good fight of faith, prayed without ceasing and trusted Jesus. Now we have the joy of realizing our Josiah is in heaven. We take great pride and joy in his decision to donate his organs. Josiah will now live on in heaven and earth. Hallelujah forever! To God be the glory!”

Subsequently, Steve wrote an excellent book to instill hope in people in a similar circumstance or facing fear for the future: *Between Heaven and Earth: Finding Hope, Courage and Passion Through a Fresh Vision of Heaven*. All the proceeds from this book go to support Josiah’s House, an orphanage for boys and girls in the Dominican Republic founded and named in honor of Steve and Sarah’s incredible son.

Persevering in Perilous Times

In my previous commentary and podcasts, I highlighted prophetic leader James Goll ministering hope by the way he handled disease, debt and death. I cited a nationwide survey revealing that during the COVID-19 crisis almost two-thirds of Americans admitted feeling hopeless, anxious, depressed or lonely on at least one of the past seven days.

With all of the unsettledness and uncertainty surrounding the coronavirus crisis, in addition to recent racial riots, we need all the encouragement we can get so we don't succumb to despair, anxiety or fear. For Christians, it is an opportune time to bear witness to fearless faith in a living God guiding and sustaining us in extremely challenging times.

May it be said of us as it was said by Paul of the early Christians he served: "We boast about you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you are enduring" (2 Thess.1:4).

3 Points to Ponder and Practice

Remaining resilient following the traumatic experience of losing a son, plus drawing from 30 years of ministry, helping individuals thrive, not merely survive through the storms of life, Steve Berger recently shared with me wisdom that brings hope to all of us during these turbulent times.

- 1. Persevere in perilous times.** The Bible graciously gives us a heads-up for the days in which we are living. "Know this: In the last days perilous times will come" (2 Tim.3:1). The Greek word used here to describe this time is the same word used to describe the condition of the Gadarene demoniac (Mark 5:1-17). Prior to the return of the Lord, conditions will not merely be bad, they'll be mad!

Berger said the Scriptures he gives to everyone in these days of the pandemic are the words of Jesus after He warned of unsettling times to come, "In your endurance you will gain

your souls" (Luke 21:19).

He emphatically challenges us: "Get a grip!"

People outside of Christ, whom we are called to reach with the transformative message of the gospel, are plagued by tormenting thoughts regarding finances, health and the future. We are to "Do all things without murmuring and disputing, that you may be blameless and harmless, sons of God, without fault, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine as lights in the world. Hold forth the word of life" (Phil. 2:14-16a).

Berger, his wife of over 30 years and their family of four have persevered and impacted multitudes of lives in this area and beyond. We're called to do likewise without "murmuring (complaining) or "disputing" (arguing) as we persevere in faith through these trying times.

"By perseverance the snail made it into the Ark." –Charles Spurgeon

"The darkest hours are just before dawn." –English proverb

2. People-watch to gain inspiration. Growing up Catholic and attending Mass faithfully, as a youth I was bored but developed the skill of people-watching at Communion time. I studied their faces, their clothing and if they were cute or cool!

When I took the Strengthsfinder assessment to discover how God had "wired" me, I found out that my No. 1 strength was that of a "learner." When I spent time with Steve, I sensed we share the same spirit to glean from others and grow.

Dale Carnegie, Christian author who helped countless millions of people overcome worry and communicate fearlessly to succeed in life, said, "Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there

seemed to be no hope at all.” How relevant this is for people feeling hopeless amidst the COVID-19 crisis and escalating racial tension today.

To anyone tempted to throw in the towel regarding health issues, a job search or financial setbacks, remember Abraham Lincoln’s journey:

- 1831, failed in business.
- 1832, defeated for legislature.
- 1833, again failed in business.
- 1835, sweetheart died.
- 1838, defeated for Speaker.
- 1840, defeated for elector.
- 1843, defeated for Congress.
- 1855, defeated for Senate.
- 1856, defeated for vice president.
- 1858, again defeated for Senate.
- 1860, elected president of the United States

Historians almost unanimously agree: Abraham Lincoln was one of the two or three greatest presidents in America’s history. He endured when it repeatedly seemed like the end.

3. Put things in perspective. Berger believes this time is for personal and national repentance to experience a third Great Awakening. He stated passionately, “Our turn causes God’s turn!” He reminds us that 2 Chronicles 7:14 is preceded by a time of judgment–drought, devastation and disease–to jolt God’s people to realign with a holy and just God. We’re at a tipping point for America, and the time is now to

wholeheartedly respond.

In a tumultuous time like this, it is easy to lose perspective and think this has to be the worst time in history, but it's not. There is chaos, confusion and consternation, but it is in times like these when roots can go deeper, character be developed and the book of Acts church come to life!

"One should be able to see things as hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise." –F. Scott Fitzgerald

Here's the Deal: Five of the seven churches in Revelation were told to repent, and God is saying the same to us in America today. May we be filled with hope that the best is yet to come. Let's persevere and keep God's perspective.

Consider the immortal words of C.S. Lewis from decades ago after the devastating Great Depression, Hitler's Nazi reign, the horrors of World War II and terrors of the atomic age. May our dear brother help us put things in perspective with what we're facing while still being blessed beyond measure in Christ.

In one way we think a great deal too much of the atomic bomb. "How are we to live in an atomic age?" I am tempted to reply: "Why, as you would have lived in the 16th century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an age of syphilis, an age of paralysis, an age of air raids, an age of railway accidents, an age of motor accidents."

In other words, do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. Believe me, dear sir or madam, you and all whom you love were already sentenced to death before the atomic bomb was invented: and quite a high percentage of us were going to die in unpleasant ways.

We had, indeed, one very great advantage over our ancestors—anesthetics; but we have that still. It is perfectly ridiculous to go about whimpering and drawing long faces because the scientists have added one more chance of painful and premature death to a world which already bristled with such chances... and in which death itself was not a chance at all, but a certainty.

This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.

The wisdom of C.S. Lewis is tremendously applicable for us today. {eoa}