

## ***Burdens to Bear***

In the name of him who bears in his body the marks of our sin, dear friends in Christ: I'm going to begin by asking you to use your imagination a bit. As most of you know, I spent a lot of years in the Army as a combat engineer, and what I'd like you to do is imagine yourself taking part in a mission behind enemy lines with me. Let's say we've got an eleven-man squad. Our mission is to infiltrate through the enemy front lines at night, travel some eight miles through occupied territory, locate a certain railroad trestle that's an important part of the enemy supply line, neutralize whatever forces might be guarding it, prepare the trestle for demolition, destroy it, and get back to our lines before sunrise – or, if we run out of time, find a place to lay low for the day and then cross back over to the friendly side the following night. Got it? That's the mission.

And having been on many such missions in training exercises, let me tell you that one of the biggest things we have to figure out is how we're going to carry everything we need to do the job. You see, each man in the squad has his own personal equipment: rifle, helmet, ammunition, canteens, gas mask, first aid kit, and a few other odds and ends. Altogether it weighs maybe twenty-five pounds. Then, because it's a mission that may take more than a day, we're going to need to take our backpacks with extra water and ammo, food, wet weather gear, extra socks and clothing, and depending on the weather we might need cold weather and sleeping gear too. So, add another twenty-five pounds for each man. And maybe now you're thinking, "Okay, sixteen-mile walk, fifty pounds to carry ... it's not going to be fun, but it's doable. (Or at least it might have been when I was younger.)" Ah, but there's more; because in addition to all that stuff that each person carries, there's more equipment that belongs to the whole group. We start with a machinegun that weighs in at thirty pounds all by itself, plus maybe seven hundred rounds of ammo for it. That's another thirty pounds. Then there's our radio; with extra batteries that's at least twenty pounds. Then we've got a pair of grenade launchers and ammunition for them; say thirty more pounds. And to round things out we'll also take three or four shoulder-fired anti-tank rockets at fifteen pounds each. I hope you're getting the picture. But wait, there's more. We're engineers, remember? That means we've also got to carry our tools: say a chainsaw, fuel for it, a couple axes, a demolition kit, a couple 500 ft spools of detonating wire, large bolt cutters, oh, and lest we forget, the two hundred fifty pounds of high explosives that someone at headquarters calculated we'd need to blow the trestle.

This extra equipment that belongs to the whole squad needs to be distributed wisely among its members. I mean, it doesn't make sense to hand the heavy machinegun to the skinny wisp of a kid who only weighs 110 pounds soaking wet. Instead, you give it to the hulking 260-pound bodybuilder in the squad. Stuff like the high explosives and machinegun ammo can be distributed fairly evenly; but other large items can't be. Then you've got your point man. You want to keep him relatively unencumbered because he's scouting ahead, and he has to be light on his feet. You don't want him crashing through the brush like an elephant announcing your presence to the enemy – we're trying to be sneaky here. So, what I'm saying is that the whole thing takes a lot of planning and teamwork. We've got a lot to carry, and yet we've got to be careful not to overload anyone because then they won't be able to keep up – and we need every man for the job. Besides, we're a team. We've got some group cohesion and camaraderie going on here. We've got a mission to do and we're going to do it. And we're going to bring back every man alive if possible. And that means that we may have to do some redistribution of the weight while we're on the march. Especially if someone sprains an ankle or gets wounded by enemy fire, we may need to lighten his load by distributing it some of it to others. And if someone gets seriously wounded, we may end up having to carry him, which will be a big additional load for the rest of us. Not only will it take two guys to carry him, but we'll also have to give *all* of his equipment to others to carry – plus we'll have to lighten the loads of the guys who have to carry him by taking some of their stuff too.

And if by now you're getting the idea that if you're in the Army you spend a lot of your time serving as a pack animal, you're right. Carrying heavy loads for long distances is often a big part of the job. (Maybe that's why I'm a pastor now. Anyway) that's why they spend so much time doing physical training and going on

forced marches. They want the soldiers to be physically fit. That's also why they have inspections of everybody's gear before a mission. It sometimes happens that soldiers get a little lazy and deliberately lighten their load by leaving behind stuff they *think* they won't need. If you're in charge, you've got to make sure they've got it all. On the other hand, sometimes soldiers want to take along things they really *don't* need. "Private Jones, what's this bowling ball doing in your backpack?" Okay, that's a little silly – but you'd be surprised at some of the stuff they'd bring along if you let them. So, for their own good – and the good of everyone else because we all suffer if someone is overloaded – you've got to make sure your men are not unnecessarily encumbered. And sometimes it's good to stop and check what they're carrying even while you're on the go because one of the oldest dirty tricks soldiers, boy scouts, and backpackers sometimes play on each other is to put heavy rocks in the rucksack of a guy they want to get even with. I don't imagine it happens much in real combat missions; but I know it happens fairly often during training.

All right, if at this point you're wondering what *any* of this has got to do with some kind of spiritual lesson, I'm about to tell you. It turns out that the imaginary situation I've described so far is not as hypothetical as it may seem. You see there is a very real sense in which we as members of the church of Christ are on a mission behind enemy lines. Every day as we go along through our lives doing the things we need to do we are maneuvering through Satan's territory. Like soldiers on a combat mission, we have things we have to accomplish collectively as a group; and individually we all have our own specific roles in making those things happen. And there's danger out there. The enemy would very much like to see us fail. Even more he'd like to destroy us. So, we've got to hang together, watch out for one another, and work together as a team, as we march along bearing the heavy loads that we've got to carry.

This is what Paul is saying in this morning's Epistle lesson. And what I want you to see is that the same things that apply to a combat engineer squad conducting a mission behind enemy lines apply also to us in the church. The biggest difference is that what holds a group of soldiers together as they conduct their missions is the camaraderie born of shared hardship and common experience. In the Church we've got that too, sure; but what bonds us together even stronger is the love of Christ who dwells within us and makes us brothers and sisters in the family of our Heavenly Father. That's also what gives us the strength and fortitude we need to bear our burdens.

For we all have burdens to bear. To begin with, and closest to home, each one of us has an individual spiritual load. Our Christian faith, though we hold it all in common, is ultimately very personal. No one can believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ for you. And one day you will appear individually before the judgment seat of God. Then the question will not be, "What were you taught?" or "What was the confession of your church?" but rather, "In whom do you trust?" Are you covered by the righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus who suffered and died for your sin? Or are you standing before God in the filth of your sins trying to hide them behind the soiled rags of your own imagined goodness? Obviously, we'd all prefer to be in the former uniform – but we also know our natural inclinations are to lean toward putting on the latter, which is why our Christian faith needs to be exercised, built up, and retained through certain spiritual disciplines. Just as a soldier builds and maintains his strength through physical training, we keep up our spiritual fitness through the means the Lord has given us to do that. Namely through continued exposure to God's Word by which the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sins and turns our hearts to Christ for forgiveness. This is what our weekly worship services are all about. And of course, there are a number of individual disciplines that help as well: daily devotions, Bible reading, confession, repentance, and prayer—the point is that you have to be participating though. The person who says he can continue to be a good Christian without these things is like an athlete who thinks he can stay in shape by watching sports on TV. It doesn't work that way. The only one who can keep your spiritual house in order is you, and that's what St. Paul means when he says each one must bear his own load.

Of course, we all have other kinds of individual burdens to bear. We've got jobs, families, and all kinds of other obligations – some of which are absolutely necessary, and others that we carry by choice. Either way, they can't be allowed to interfere with our first obligation to keep up our own faith in Christ. And certainly, when something we are carrying by choice comes into conflict with that first need, it's time to let it go. Put the bowling ball down (and I mean that figuratively. I haven't got anything against bowling—unless you want to do on Sunday mornings). But speaking of bowling balls, there's another kind of useless and detrimental weight that we sometimes try to carry on the mission, and that's a favorite sin that we don't want to let go of. We sneak it into our backpacks hoping that no one else will notice—but it's usually easy enough to detect. When

we see a brother or sister struggling, stumbling along, and falling behind for no apparent outward reason it's pretty clear there's something wrong. Or maybe someone knows very well what the problem is because they saw the person pick it up. Whichever the case, it's up to the rest of us to help that person out. Paul writes: "Brothers, if anyone is caught up in a transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness." It means we need to confront the person with their sin, gently, yes, without anger or malice; but with Christian love and firmly enough to do the job. We've got to get that extra weight off so the person can keep up. Otherwise he or she will be lost to enemy.

And while we're speaking of carrying unnecessary burdens, you want to be careful not to impose them on any of your fellow soldiers. This happens when you refuse to forgive a brother or sister in Christ who has offended you. It's like putting rocks in their rucksack. The thing most people forget is that by not forgiving and harboring anger in their hearts, they are putting even heavier stones in their own backpacks. We need to get rid of all this useless, harmful weight because it only wears us out and makes that much less able to carry the burdens we need to in order to complete our mission.

And it's vital that we have some ability to bear more weight because in addition to the personal loads we carry, there're other obligations that we have as a group. A church needs structure and organization, and so some are given the task of carrying the responsibility of serving as officers in the church. We need leaders who help look out for the spiritual welfare of the members as well as those who take on the task of keeping up the property and managing the books. Others bear the load of teaching Sunday school, or preparing the altar for communion, or all the hundreds of other things that need to be done to keep it going. One burden we all bear is that of supporting the church financially. Paul writes that the one who is taught should share all good things with the teacher. The basic idea is that to the degree that the Lord prospers you, you in turn should contribute toward keeping the ministry going. Those who are financially the strongest should bear the bulk of the weight – but everyone should do their part. Here at St. Paul we've taken on the additional burden of operating a Christian day school. It's a noble mission and we can be grateful that the Lord gives us the strength and will to carry it, because through it he is grounding young lives in the Word of God and building them up so that one day they in their turn will be better able to bear the weight of the mission.

And while we're marching along we've got to watch out for each other. Especially when someone is wounded by the circumstances of life or the sniper fire of the evil one, we may need to lighten their loads and place some of it upon our own shoulders. This is what Paul means when he says, "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." If you see someone go down then it's up to you treat their wounds and help them to their feet and say, "Here, let me take some of what you're carrying." And if you need more help, you call for it. We're all in this together and we're not leaving anyone behind.

And something else we also want to be alert to is the tendency we all have to think that *I'm doing more than my fair share*. This can either be *prideful*, as in, "This outfit couldn't make it without me and all the things I do" or *resentful*, as in, "Why am I the one who always gets stuck doing everything? Why do I have to carry the whole load?" Sometimes it's both attitudes at once; but either way it's the wrong way to look at it. It's the Lord himself who does the weight distribution. He determines who should carry what. And his wise decisions in this regard are not based on what we think is fair and equitable. He's not comparing your load to that carried by others; but rather to the strength, capability, talents, and resources he has given you – and, I might add, to the strength and ability that could be yours if you'd only ask it of him. I've a hunch that we could all be doing more for the kingdom of God and for our brothers and sisters in Christ if only we'd open ourselves to the both the spiritual gifts and opportunities the Lord provides for us.

So, in light of all this, what I'd ask today is for you to do a thorough inspection of yourself. What are you carrying that you shouldn't be? What could you be carrying that you're not? How could you be increasing your ability to carry more of the load? Who are you neglecting that could really use your help? Who are you weighing down with your criticism and lack of forgiveness? In what ways have you been resentful of the burden the Lord has given you? In what ways have you been full of pride about it?

Such an inspection, if done honestly, will bring us all to the same place: to our knees in repentance. But that's a good place to be, for from there we can receive again the Word of Christ's forgiveness, which is the power that lifts us up and gives us the ability to bear our burdens. Then too we will

see that by carrying the comparatively small loads that we've been assigned, we are imitating in a very tiny way the Lord Jesus who carried on the cross the enormous weight of the whole world's sin. If we feel like boasting, with St. Paul let's boast about what Christ has done for us – and that the best “burden” we bear is the sign of his cross on our foreheads. Now, let's carry on with the mission, in Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***