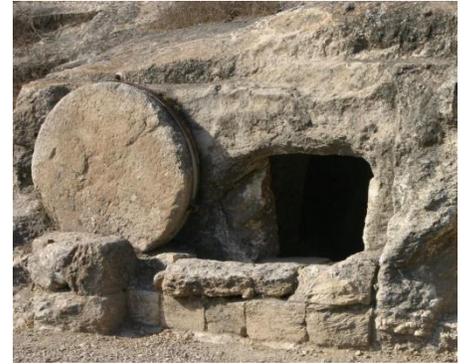


## Exercising Faith Through the Realities of Life

Those who know our family are aware that we are Carolina Tar Heel basketball fans. We watch many of the games with our extended family. All 5 grandchildren have Tar Heel shirts and the granddaughters do an echo “Tar, Heel” cheer. We look forward to the basketball season each year and agonize over bumps in the road, such as injuries and athletes who leave early to pursue NBA careers. This year UNC was a #1 seed yet were defeated in the second weekend of the NCAA tournament. Their national championship hopes were dashed by the flu, a tough opponent and poor play on their part. That was a disappointing day. We had watched the game at our daughter’s house and barely spoke on the car ride home. We are invested in this school both as a taxpayer of the state of North Carolina and also having paid four years of tuition for our oldest son. So, our interest is genuine and lasting. Being a permanent fan means that even during the dark days we remain loyal. A season filled with promise and the excitement of up-tempo play ended with the starting line-up sitting on the bench, towels draped over their heads and tears in their eyes, as the clock counted down to zero.



At the time of the crucifixion, the Bible tells us, the disciples scattered, leaving Jesus to face the horrors of the cross alone. Jesus knew this was going to happen. *“Do you now believe?” Jesus replied. “A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me John 16:31-32).* What the disciples experienced was far more dramatic than any disappointing end to the basketball season. They had been invested with Jesus, being in the presence of the Lord for three years. And yet their lives bottomed out when the sky turned dark at Golgotha. The highs of the triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday became the lows of Good Friday.

Even when we have a strong faith, life isn’t all peaches and cream. We can be “one with the Father” and yet disaster still strikes. That is actually part of God’s plan to grow our faith. God doesn’t shield us from difficult times although He promises to be with us always. We still get that empty feeling when something bad happens. There are times when we may be figuratively sitting on the bench with a towel draped over our head and tears in our eyes. Oswald Chambers describes this as a time to deepen our faith. He said, “Until we have been through that experience, our faith is sustained only by feelings and by blessings. But once we get there, no matter where God may place us or what inner emptiness we experience, we can praise God that all is well. That is what is meant by faith being exercised in the realities of life.”

Chambers said, “Until Jesus Christ is truly our Lord, we each have goals of our own which we serve. Our faith is real, but it is not yet permanent. ... If we are willing to wait, we will see God pointing out that we have been interested only in His blessings, instead of in God Himself.”

Hope is a promise that God has made to us and will be fulfilled. In John 16:33 *God tells us to “... be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”* The difficult times can be a time to strengthen our faith and glorify God. Jesus was resurrected as proof of the victory that He has won for us.

It seems trite to look at our basketball analogy, but we all live in the real world, with its ups and downs. I am a Tar Heel fan, not just in years when they win the national championship, but in all years. I know there will be good times again, but I have to be patient. Even more important, I am a loyal disciple of Jesus Christ. The test of my faith is not when everything is going great – when emotions are high and blessings overflowing, but at all times. During the tough times I need to fix my eyes on Jesus and glorify God. It is my prayer for you and me that the realities of the empty times of our lives will be transformed by the reality of the empty tomb. We know that God will carry us through the tough times as we seek the fulfillment of His promises.

**The Bible Says:** *Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.” (Deuteronomy 31:6).*

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father. When things are going great it is possible that our faith is sustained by the acknowledgement of your many blessings on our life. But, there are dark days, too. Let us always focus on you, knowing you will carry us through the difficult times towards the victory You have already won for us. Amen.