

Without Hindrance!

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On a recent windy day, Tia and I went to our beautiful West Bay in Traverse City in order to see the waves. The waves were four or five feet high, splashing over piers and cars. There were, nonetheless, ducks floating serenely upon the waves, bobbing up and down with the waves, seemingly completely unbothered and without vexation. It occurred to me that the ducks were without hindrance, not hindered by waves or by wind or by readily floating debris.

Seeing the ducks float “without hindrance” caused me to remember a final verdict on the apostle Paul in the last verse of the Book of Acts. The writer (Luke) reports that Paul was in Rome, “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31).

Given what we know about Paul and his many “toils and snares,” it is reassuring (and surprising!) that in his later days, he could continue his bold work “without hindrance,” not hindered by imperial authorities in Rome where he proclaimed “another kingdom.” Nor was he hindered by Gentiles who baited him or by Jews who contested with him (see Acts 17:16-21). I could imagine Paul, not unlike those ducks, floating serenely about his work, unhindered, unbothered, and undisturbed.

This is a remarkable verdict on Paul, given what we know of his vexed life and ministry. He himself summarizes the many hindrances that he faced:

I am talking like a madman—I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. (II Cor. 11:23-28)

All of that, however, seems to have been processed and digested (not forgotten!) in ways that permit Paul to finish “without hindrance.”

This collection of “hindrances” that accumulated for Paul over time is likely more hazardous than most preachers face. But every preacher, in a moment of self-pity not unlike that of Paul, could as well offer a recital of something like that of Paul. It might go like this:

I feel—when I think about it—like a madman (or mad woman). Countless insults, often near humiliation that has filled me with lingering hurt. I have received from believing folk forty hostile phone calls minus one. Three

times I was harshly critiqued unfairly by my board. Once I had my monthly check withheld by a stubborn treasurer. Two times I have had folk cancel their pledges in anger. For a night and a day I knew myself to be abandoned and without support, in danger from my own congregation, danger from outsiders in the community, danger from neighbors, danger from fickle colleagues, danger from a remote unsupportive judicatory...many a sleepless night...under daily pressure because of anxiety for the church.

None of this is as heroic as is Paul. It is, nonetheless, enough to cause sleepless nights and vexed days, with loss of appetite, temptation to drink...weak...made to stumble, and indignant (see II Cor. 11:29). Nobody said being a preacher would be easy. So how could Paul then be “without hindrance”? How could ducks float in a storm without hindrance? How could contemporary preachers continue in boldness in ministry without hindrance? Luke, in the book of Acts, does not tell us, but he certainly knew of Paul’s inventory of vexations.

We are free to imagine Paul as a child of the gospel who so fully trusted in God’s faithfulness that all his tribulations were kept in manageable perspective. He does not deny them or disregard them or minimize them. He names them and looks them full in the face. Indeed, perhaps he treasures them as markers of his boldness and fidelity. He nonetheless submits all of his troubles to the deeper, more elemental, more reliable claim of the gospel. He not only *proclaims* the goodness of God; he himself *entrusts his own life* to that goodness. This permits Paul, in his later years but surely all along the way, to turn his attention and energy away from his every trouble to the deep truth of the gospel that he has embraced. Indeed we may imagine that the ducks float serenely through the storm because they know that the water will hold. The water is trustworthy and buoyant, and will not fail because of the wind.

Thus I imagine a local pastor, much beset in the congregation: arguments about the color of the chancel carpet, disputes about the schedule of the youth program that collides with a basketball game, feuding families that preclude congregational harmony, irate parishioners who flail at a critiques of “45” or “being too political,” even if done obliquely.

The local preacher can be done in by such daily challenges from those who are trapped in various alienations. The local preacher alternatively can, like the ducks, trust the buoyancy of the water, be like Paul to fall back into the goodness of God in a way that makes all the tribulations distinctly penultimate. To refocus attention on the basics is not easy in the midst of a troubled day. But no doubt those who embrace the freedom of the gospel are able to see past *the daily storm* to the *abiding buoyancy*.

I am not sure the ducks are singing when they quack. But if they are singing, I hope they have in their repertoire this hymn that I sang in my growing up years:

Jesus, Savior, pilot me
Over life’s tempestuous sea;
Unknown waves before me roll,
Hiding rock and treach’rous shoal.
Chart and compass came from thee;
Jesus, Savior, pilot me.

As a mother stills her child,
Thou canst hush the ocean wild;
Boist'rous waves obey thy will
When thou say'st to them, "Be still!"
Wondrous Sov'reign of the sea,
Jesus, Savior, pilot me.

When at last I near the shore,
And the fearful breakers roar
'Twixt me and the peaceful rest,
Then, while leaning on thy breast,
May I hear thee say to me,
"Fear not; I will pilot thee."

This was a hymn for Paul in his many days of trouble. It is a hymn for preachers every day. We do not need to be on automatic pilot, nor do we need to be at sea rudderless. Imagine differently the voice of the One who sees the waves and says in sovereign calmness, "Be still." It is enough to live "without hindrance."