

The Things We Ponder - Philippians 4:4-9

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The 24/7 news out of Israel in the last week has been so disheartening. The brutal atrocities carried out by the terrorist group, Hamas, upon the Israeli people, have been so disturbing. Beatings, beheadings, kidnappings...how could this have happened? And how could a human being do this to another human?

Not only does this great injustice make our hearts sick for the people who have been so badly terrorized, it also leaves us discouraged over what may come there: greater regional instability, more war, widening conflicts that draw in other nations, and continued tension and violence that seems to be the hallmark of a region for at least the last six decades.

It is depressing, isn't it, this ongoing conflict there? If we think too much about it—the fighting, the hate, the mistrust, the bleak outcome for peace—it all can sink our moods and affect our mental health and the outlooks we have on the future.

Much of the depression we experience is largely a result of what we observe in the world around us. It's due, in large part, to the fact that bad news seems to be at the forefront of people's consciousness. And when that happens, we can let that bad news affect our outlooks.

What else are you thinking about these days? While Middle East peace is a hot topic, I'm sure there are other things that are stressing you out.

If you're a teenager, my guess is that the absence of Middle East peace takes a backseat to other more pertinent issues—school projects, relationships with friends, college plans, the game this Friday night, the band competition this weekend.

If you're a parent of a teenager, the stressors in your life are probably centered around your kids, what they're doing, who they're

hanging out with, what's going to become of them in school this year or when they graduate.

If you're a preschooler, and you mention the words "Middle East peace" to them, all they care about is whether or not it's going to interfere with snack time. Because snack time is what they're ultimately thinking about. What's for snack today? When is snack time? Who's bringing the snack? When am I bringing the snack next? What should I bring the next time I bring the snack? Life's challenges for them are centered around snacks.

Or maybe top of mind for you is your favorite team and their success—Vols, Tide, Cyclones, Titans, Packers, Falcons, Braves. And your worries center on their woes. Or maybe you don't care about any of that stuff. Feel blessed.

If you're a working adult, the things at the forefront of your mind might be the organization you work for, the product you're selling, or the business you own.

Or maybe our minds are occupied by our sinful tendencies—how to get even with somebody we don't like, how to selfishly get the most for ourselves at the expense of others, how to take shortcuts in our relationships with spouses, co-workers, or friends.

Or maybe it's our health and our health problems that consume us: the aches and pains, the diagnosis we didn't see coming, and the impact that health decline has on our daily living.

All these things are stressful, to the point where we need a diversion—something to take our minds off these matters that only add stress to our days.

The apostle Paul has some advice for us, we who are stressed out by life's great challenges. It's the advice he gave from prison to the Philippian church, which was struggling with how to be the church amidst the challenges that early Christians faced.

He said to them and he says to us today: "Think about these things, whatever is just, pure, pleasing, excellent, and worthy of praise." That's our call today from God, to focus on those things that

can cut through the gloom of world conflict, job or school worries, health concerns, or kid challenges.

Those things that are pleasing, or excellent, or worthy of praise—how much more fun and healthier is it for us to focus our attention on these things rather than those other things that would otherwise wear us down?

We've had so many beautiful fall days in recent weeks. It would seem impossible for us not to notice the beauty of the earth in the changing of the colors and in the crispness of the air. The beauty of fall is certainly something worth pondering.

The courage and strength of people who put cheerful faces on sad situations—these are also things worth pondering these days. In our own minds, we can think of individuals that exude unique strength and character amid hardship. They are genuine examples of that which is pleasing and commendable and excellent.

Rachel Naomi Remmen, in a book titled *My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging*, writes this account of a relationship she had with a woman named Mae.

"Mae celebrated life. Her laugh was pure joy. It made you remember how to laugh yourself. All these years later, just thinking of her makes me smile. As she became sicker, I began to call her every few days to check in on her. She would always answer the phone in the same way. I would say, "Mae, how ya doin'?" and she would chuckle and reply, "I'm blessed, Sister. I am blessed."

The night before she died, I called, and her family had brought the phone to her. "Mae," I said. "It's Rachel." I could hear her coughing and clearing her throat, looking to find breath enough to speak in a lung filled with cancer, willing herself past a fog of morphine to connect my voice. Tears stung my eyes. "Mae," I said. "It's Rachel. How ya doin'?" There was a sound I could not identify, which slowly unwrapped itself into a deep chuckle. "I'm blessed, Rachel. I am blessed," she told me. Mae was one of those people. And so, perhaps, are we all

Remmen writes, "We can bless others only when we feel blessed

ourselves. Blessing life may be more about learning how to celebrate life than learning how to fix life. It may require an appreciation of life as it is and an acceptance of much in life that we cannot understand.”

Those people who are blessings in our lives — these are things to ponder.

In the end, things which are pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise (like beautiful fall weather and people who live life courageously and abundantly) come from one source: A God of hope and grace, who in Jesus Christ has reached out to each of us and has given us permission to be hopeful people ourselves. Amid turmoil and uncertainty in the many aspects of our world’s affairs, there is a hopeful message of love and reconciliation that is for us to receive and for us to possess within us. It is the antidote for the virus of gloom that would otherwise pervade our minds and hearts.

It is the hope that we have in Jesus Christ that should cause us to rejoice in the Lord always.

Pastor and theology professor Victor Shepard tells the story of John Newton, Anglican clergyman, hymn-writer, counselor and former slave-ship captain.

John met Mary Catlett when he was 14 and she 12. They loved each other ardently. Newton spent years at sea on merchant ships, warships and slave-ships. He saw Mary infrequently. Yet their love for each other was undying. By age 39 Newton had become a beneficiary of the “amazing grace” for which he would be known ever after.

He was now finished with the sea and would spend the rest of his long life as a preacher and pastor. He had always assumed that he would predecease his wife, unable as he was to imagine living without her. She, however, died first. Mary was buried on a Wednesday.

Four days later, on Sunday, Newton stood up in the pulpit of his church in London. Everyone wondered what text the broken-hearted man would preach on that day. It was from the book of

Habakkuk. "Though the fig tree does not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines ... the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, YET I WILL REJOICE IN THE LORD, I WILL JOY IN THE GOD OF MY SALVATION"

And so let us rejoice in the Lord today, for those things that come from God and can lead us to ponder the blessings around us.