

**“I Will Tell You What He Has Done for Me!”**

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Sometimes when someone mentions the word “Presbyterian” they think of “predestination.” If you study John Calvin at all, we are saddled with this awful thing called “double-predestination.”

I’m not even going to get into that, because John Calvin was dead wrong - but I don’t have time to argue with you right now. So we will talk about another word meaning “predestination.” But first I’m going to say that predestination is also in the Bible, folks. Look it up. It’s in St. Paul’s letters. But what Paul meant and what Calvin tried to do, but did it poorly, was to talk about predestination as a word of comfort.

The word “election” has the same meaning. Paul was trying to comfort us by saying, if we are of the “elect,” that God chose us. That no matter how difficult our time on this earth is, we can feel safe and secure in knowing that God knows us - that God loves us - and that God will bring us safely home. There are times in our lives when this word is so difficult, so painful that that is all that we can hold on to.

All of the other philosophical arguments about predestination are just ridiculous. What it was attempting to do was to provide us with safety and security, while we were trying to live out the hardships of our days. That is what the psalmist was trying to say when he talked about God delivering the people; he was telling his story so the rest of the people would understand that God will protect and deliver them as well.

Now I want to share a story with you. Because, frankly, my story isn’t all that interesting - but I know some people whose stories are very interesting: life-changing. Some of you know this story, because you knew him for a long time. His name was John Phillips. I realized, as I talked to people, that a lot of you know some of his story. Some of you know all of it; but some of you do not know any of that story, or because either you didn’t know John or you are new here. This was someone who sat in the pew here up until last November. He didn’t tell his story much until the last years of his life, and I want to make sure every single one of you knows it.

John - like everyone else when World War II hit - wanted to serve his country. So, while he was finishing his third year of college he decided, “That’s it. I have finished three years of college. I’m enlisting.”

Because he wasn’t a college graduate he enlisted as a private. He wanted to work his way up to flying planes. He really tried and was excited about it. The problem was that when he went in for his physical he found out, for the first time, that he was color blind. So he had to go from flying planes to being stuck in, of all things, the infantry - the most dangerous, frustrating place you could be.

He worked his way up because, if you knew John very well, you knew that when he put his mind to it, by golly, he would move mountains to do it. So, by 1943, he was commissioned as an officer, and by 1944, in the infantry, John had a number of men under him and a wonderful sergeant beside him, as they fought the Battle of the Bulge.

Now the United States was winning the war by this time. Normandy was during the summer of 1944, or maybe we got a little cocky, or we were so busy planning our next challenge, but by December and into January of 1945 we were not the ones attacking at the Battle of the Bulge - the Germans were. They attacked and surprised us; surprised us in such a difficult and painful war that we are still feeling the ramifications of it. There were over 89,000 casualties. Nearly 20,000 Americans were killed.

Two of those casualties were John Phillips and his sergeant. John gathered his men to walk over the hill, when they were just shattered with gun fire. The sergeant had both of his legs shot and down he went. John was shot five times: through the bicep, which made the arm almost lifeless; three times in the stomach, just below the heart; and, in the heart. John is the one you hear about who had his little New Testament in his left breast pocket. When the bullet hit the Bible, it stopped. That was one of the miraculous moments why John Phillips lived. He lay there, along with his sergeant next to him, bleeding. You can only imagine how quickly he should have turned septic from the bullet holes in his stomach. He should have been toxic in seconds.

The Germans came up over the rise, came down and grabbed John. The German Army did not take enlisted personnel. They just let them die. But they took officers so they could interrogate them, so they grabbed John - who was a lieutenant - picked him up and made him march - four bullet holes in him. If you know John, you know there was a little stubbornness there. He said, "Wait a minute. What about my Sergeant?" The Germans who almost laughed, because the man had four bullet holes in him said, "If you want him, you carry him."

John grabbed his sergeant, threw him over his shoulder, and started to carry him. If you knew John, he was five feet-nothing and maybe 100 Lbs., but he carried him - I can't remember if it was 300 feet or 300 yards, but it really doesn't matter. John realized that with everything just spewing out of his sergeant, John couldn't do it. So, John sat his sergeant down, fixed his legs the best he could, and said good bye. John wondered most of the rest of his life what happened to his friend.

They marched, with John trying to hold himself in. He marched for miles and finally got to a place where the Germans did surgery. John was taken to a very nice German doctor who had studied in the United States. It was funny because, after the surgery, this surgeon said, "I studied in the United States and I hope that someday I can go back there." John looked at him, dead serious, and said, "So do I." John never lost his sense of humor.

The doctors did the surgery. I'm not sure how much anesthesia was used. Remember, we are talking about January of 1945. The Germans didn't have anything left. They did the surgery and took three bullets out of his stomach. The doctor said, "I'm not sewing you up, because if I do, you will become infected and die. I'm going to leave the wounds open and maybe you will have a chance."

They left him on a table and then - days later - the Gestapo came, because the only reason they did surgery in the first place was to interrogate John. They grabbed John, threw him down a flight of stairs and beat him - tortured him. I don't know how long. Finally, after a period of brutality, the Germans realized John didn't know that much, so they let him sit in a POW camp.

The problem was - we were winning the war. So all of the time the Allies were moving, the Germans had to keep moving the POWs. With open holes in his stomach, John is marched, mile after mile. Then they put the POWS on trains. John was a man who lived through being shot five times and lived through surgery. Do you know when they did the surgery they didn't even have bandages? They wrapped him in paper. He held the paper while marching and being putting on a train. The Allied Forces blew up trains because they thought the Germans were moving machinery, and often times they were. So sometimes POW's were blown up, but John survived this.

There was one incident when the POWs got off the train and were marching through a field where, I think it was American fighter jets came and sprayed the field, killing POWs. John turned to the German guards and said, "Get paper, roll it out on the field and spell P-O-W. The Germans finally got P-O-W spelled out, and the planes went away. John lived and saved the lives of others. He was so fortunate; there were so many miracles along the way.

Another amazing thing was - and probably another reason why he lived - when they were in the trains, in cattle cars, it was so packed that they couldn't sit. All of the men had dysentery. John had open wounds and he never became septic.

His was one of the first POW camps to be freed by the Allies. Again, God blessed John because another POW in the camp just happened to be General George Patton's son-in-law. Patton busted his tail to get across Europe to get to his son-in-law, which was another reason why maybe, just maybe, John lived.

Since the Germans had nothing left to give them, the POWs ate two things for five months: they were each given a tin can - about eight ounces - in it was boiled water that they called "green dep." In the beginning, it might have had lettuce or maybe cabbage boiled in it, but by the end of the war, there was nothing but grass boiled in water - and they drank it to have something. The other thing POWs had were little loaves of bread. Louise still has one. It's a little hard now, but the POWs called it a "tree flour loaf," and 5-6 men split a loaf once a day. Tree flour was actually crushed up saw dust, made into bread, because it at least filled their stomachs.

Patton and his army arrived. They took one look at John and said what everyone always said, "What a miracle!" They grabbed John and took him to the nearest surgery tent. But no one would touch him. They did not have the facilities to properly treat John. He was too far gone. So, they flew him back to the United States - still with open wounds. I thought it was to Walter Reed but, no, it was - of all places - Hot Springs, Arkansas. They did the surgeries - plural - over an entire year. John got out, he lived and went on to try and live a life. John tried to forget, but he couldn't. He married a wonderful woman, raised a family, and had a great life.

Then, all of a sudden, people started to hear about his story. John didn't want to tell it. For years Louise didn't know about it. Then, he was challenged to go and speak about his story at Camp Dodge and relive it once a month. He decided to do it because of the way it was phrased to him: "We want you to train, to teach these young men and women who are going into the reserve forces that are going to go into battle - Dessert Storm, later in

Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11 – we want you to tell all of these people, why training is important.”

Then John would tell this story and say, “My training got me through. If you don’t pay attention and train like your life depends on it, you may not make it through.” The recruits listened.

One person who heard John’s story was so moved that he made it his mission to find that sergeant; it was the early 2000s. The man found the sergeant’s family. The sergeant had lived until 1999. His family got to get together with John. They knew about John. They knew the whole story. When they were together, the sergeant’s daughter looked at John and said, “I exist because of you.”

That’s who sits in the pew next to you, I know of other stories, but I haven’t been given permission to tell them, about other people in the pew. John was trained by the military to endure horrible things, and he did. But like most men of his generation, he didn’t talk much about his faith. But you knew he had it. He didn’t just carry that Bible in that pocket - he read it. He was trained in not just how to put up with Gestapo beatings and how to hold his stomach in place, he was also trained in another way: in his church to pray and who God was, through reading of the Bible that was in that pocket. Louise still has the Bible. You can see where the bullet hole was.

I would argue - and if John were here I would hope he would tell me the same thing - he received that training to get through that most difficult time and for God to deliver him because he was trained in his churches to know who God was. He wasn’t praying to a stranger on that table, marching through those fields, he was praying to somebody who he knew and who he knew, knew him.

So I say to you on this Memorial Day weekend, get your training. Make sure your children have their training because, just as the Psalmist in Psalm 66, just like John, every one of us will go through the dark night of the soul; march through the valley of the shadow of death and without our training we will be praying to a God we do not know and won’t even know how, but like military training, for it to work, it has to be second nature.

May the spiritual training you receive here be second nature so that when it hurts and when you are scared and don’t know what to do or where to go, instinctually you will stop, pray and know - because through experience, prayer and knowledge of Scripture – you will know who you are praying to, who has elected you, knows your name and how many hairs are on your head.

Just like God was there for John, God is there for you. I promise you, too, like John will be delivered. Amen