**PREACHING**

***The Greatest Balancing Act***

Twenty-seven years before the tragic 9-11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center a man by the name of Philippe Petit stunned the world by performing a highwire walk between New York’s Twin Towers. It was August 7, 1974 and the Frenchman gained world-wide fame as he walked 1,350 feet above street level with no net beneath him. He had illegally planned the walk for up to six years before he made it. At 7:00 am on that morning he stepped out over the ledge and began his balancing act, going back and forth between the towers eight times while the police were trying to get him to surrender. He even sat down, then laid down, between the towers knowing full well no one was going to be crazy enough to come out there after him.

Balancing on a tightrope has thrilled the world for centuries. The Great Wallendas captivated the world with their amazing seven-person chair pyramid act back in the 1960’s. One of their grandsons, Nik Wallenda, walked across the widest point of Niagara Falls in 2012, then walked across the Little Colorado River Gorge of the Grand Canyon in 2013 in just 23 minutes. Jean François Gravelet (aka Charles Blondin) was perhaps the greatest wire-walker in history. He made his name and fame back in the 1800’s by walking across Niagara Falls many times, even doing it blindfolded, or pushing a wheelbarrow, or carrying a man on his back, or sitting down to cook an egg, and even standing on a chair with only one leg balanced on the rope! Imagine that.

But do you know perhaps the hardest balancing act in history? Preaching the gospel!

In these modern times, in most cases, it is not death-defying. But history reveals many cases in which the preacher faced a hostile audience which led to his death. Read the lives of preachers like John the Baptist (Matt. 14), Stephen (Ac. 7), James (Ac 12), Paul (2 Tim. 4), and Antipas (Rev. 2:13). Then read the history of Christianity from the second century to today that is filled with the martyrdom of preachers. Monthly I read a periodical called *Voice Of The Martyrs* which documents the persecutions of believers around the world that are standing up to teach in the face of communism, fascism, Islamic terrorism, and other forms of evil. Our eyes need to be opened to the cold-hard fact that we are still living in a “*crooked and perverse generation”* (Phil. 2:15).

I’m a gospel preacher. No, I have not faced the threat of death, nor have I been imprisoned, hanged, stoned, drawn and quartered, tarred and feathered, or ever been run out of town on a rail. For that I am grateful. I stand on the shoulders of giants who have gone before me to pave the way. They have for me, like John did for Jesus, made straight paths from the crooked (Lk., 3:4-5). I thank God there have been “*a great cloud of witnesses*” who were trailblazers of the faith (Heb. 12:1-2). I sing the hymn *Faith of our Fathers* with tearful eyes and reverent respect as I think of those great men who paved the way.

But, like all faithful gospel preachers before me, I have had to walk a tightrope in my own way. I have had to spend my entire preaching life (1975 to present) trying to balance my sermons so that I can fulfill the Lord’s command to “*Preach the Word, be urgent in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke and exhort with all longsuffering and teaching*” (2 Tim. 4:2). It’s a delicate balancing act. Like a daredevil tightrope walker, the preacher of the gospel has to often have (as one man put it) “the mind of a scholar, the heart of a child and the hide of a rhinoceros." When I am called each week to “stand and deliver” the first thought I have is fear. Yes, it used to be fear of the brethren, but now it is fear of God. I quote James 3:1 every time I step into the pulpit: “*Let not many of you become teachers, for you shall receive a stricter judgment*.”

It is a balancing act trying to preach so that both sinners and saints are moved to action. As Dee Bowman used to say, preaching is “storming the will” of hearers. Often in the same sermon you must *“warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all”* (I Thess. 5:14). Try balancing on that highwire!

God has called us, as some witty scribe put it, to “comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.” We want believers to be “*always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord*” (2 Cor. 5:6); and yet we also want them to be “*forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead*” (Phil. 3:13). In other words, to be comfortably uncomfortable.

I want you to feel God’s saving grace, yet walk by obedient faith (Eph. 2:8-10; Rom. 16:26). I want you to feel Christ’s love, yet fear God and keep His commandments (Eph. 3:19; Eccl. 12:13). I want you to feel the tension between “*the goodness and severity of God*” (Rom. 11:22). My job is for everyone to be fearful of hell’s flames, yet fearless to hope for Christ’s return (2 Thess. 1:6-9). It’s the greatest balancing act on planet earth, for it has the greatest consequences. In every sermon I have to remember: “*These will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life”* (Matt. 25:46).

I love being a gospel preacher. I’ve loved it ever since I made my first bumbling attempt to preach back in 1971 (50 years ago). Preachers are in the people business. We have to work with all kinds of personalities, from Type A (“the Director”), to Type B (“the Socializer”), to Type C (“the Thinker”), to Type D (“the Supporter”). This wide pendulum swing demands that as we preach we must be “*speaking the truth in love*” (Eph. 4:15), and letting “*your speech be with grace, seasoned with salt*” (Col. 4:6).

Yes, I stand in awe of those who conquer their fears to tightrope across the Twin Towers or balance on a one-inch cable across Niagara Falls, for they are a rare breed. But I’ll tell you this, all they have to lose is their own life if they fail and fall. Gospel preachers have far more to fear then losing their physical life as they walk that tightrope between reproving, rebuking and exhorting. With some the preacher must boldly cry out, “*Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, Hypocrites*!” (Matt. 23), or “*Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come*” (Lk. 3:7). But with others we must softly whisper Jesus’ words, “*Come unto Me all you who labor and are heavy laden, I will give you rest*” (Matt. 11:30).

To Charles Blondin, Nik Wallenda, and Philippe Petit I say, “Bravo!” But to you John, Stephen, James and Paul who walked that tightrope of preaching the Truth in Love I say, “Thank you brothers, you are the greatest balancing act in history!” - Rick