

Faith / Persecution

The 11th chapter of Hebrews devotes considerable time to specific historical figures and their examples of faith. We have previously looked at most of those individuals. That narrative then strays into a discussion of unnamed prophets –

³³ Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions.

³⁴ Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.

³⁵ Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection:

³⁶ And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment:

³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented;

³⁸ (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

³⁹ And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise:

⁴⁰ God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:33-40)

Included in all this is the matter of how faith of the Lord's people plays out in the context of persecution or mistreatment. "Persecution" is defined generally as hostility or ill-treatment, especially because of such things as race, political or religious beliefs. Another definition out there reads this way: "A program or campaign to exterminate, drive away or subjugate people based on their membership in a religious, ethnic, social or racial group." You get the idea.

All true sheep suffer persecution. Some suffer more than others, or at least it could so appear to the onlooker. But just the right amount of persecution and affliction occurs throughout their lives, in various phases and at diverse times. **But thou hast fully known my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, charity, patience, persecutions, afflictions, which came unto me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra; what persecutions I endured: but out of them all the Lord delivered me. Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. (2 Timothy 3:10-12).**

The world hates God's chosen people. And the true child of God experientially knows it, as undisputed fact and reality. They understand and feel the following Bible passage down to their core: **If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own; but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you, if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also. (John 15:18-20).**

So now we see who the real hatemongers are in this world. Speak they of hate? The world is precisely what they say we are. But we are totally good with it all. Jesus saw this to be a reality spot his lambs would have to wrestle with. Hear his words of comfort:

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. (Matthew 5:10-12).

And consider Luke's companion description: **Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake. Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven: for in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets. (Luke 6:22, 23).**

Everybody in this church today has had personal experience with persecution. All that live godly must suffer persecution, one way or another. It's very unique to each individual life. Some have tasted it virtually their entire life. Others are somewhat new to it. It has waxed and waned, at times being seemingly overwhelming. But it has always been a wonderful token and sign, giving comfort that we are on the right path.

There comes a point in the life of every true child of God when it settles in how wonderful it is to be separated from the company of the people of this world. It is truly a comforting thing. It is cleansing. It gives great peace of mind. It greatly improves the experience of this worldly pilgrimage. It is solid proof of your salvation.

We have this responsibility when coping with persecution. **Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not.** (Romans 12:14). Jesus himself tells us: **But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.** (Matthew 5:44-48). This is hard medicine. At times, this seems almost impossible. But it's needful – it's a must! Our Savior tells us to do it, and if we are to believe his very words, when we do it, our reward is great and we come as close to being the children of our heavenly father as we ever can.

This is what Paul was driving at when he exhorted those at the church in Corinth – and by extension all of God's people – when he wrote: **For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.** (2 Corinthians 12:8-10).

Now, in this overall context, we would be well-advised to take a close look at Peter's writings to the scattered elect to be found in 1 Peter 4:12-19 –

¹² Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you:

¹³ But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.

¹⁴ If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified.

¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters.

¹⁶ Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.

¹⁷ For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?

¹⁸ And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?

¹⁹ Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator.

From this we can learn:

- *Don't be astonished or surprised at your sufferings that result from persecution.* That suffering is figuratively described as a fire or burning, intended to try you. The allusion is to the intense heat of the furnace of the refiner, in which he tests the genuineness and increases the purity of the precious metals. Such suffering can be severe and intense. It's hard to imagine anything more severe than those sufferings we started off with out of Hebrews Chapter 11. Torture; cruel mocking; scourging; imprisonment; stoning; sawn asunder; slain with the sword; nomadic wandering; destitution; affliction and torment. But when you are hated by the world, the wonder is that the persecution is not

more severe. What would be strange would be not being so tried and persecuted.

- *The sufferings and persecutions are needful.* They highlight the distinction between the church and the rest of the world. They keep the church from becoming perverted and worldly. It is needful that the great husbandman take the fan in his hand, that he may purge his floor, driving off the chaff, and bringing close together the good grain. As Peter says earlier in this same epistle, **Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.** (1 Peter 1:5-7; emphasis added).
- *Christ met with severe sufferings, as did the brethren that have gone before.* John 15:20, previously quoted, has Jesus telling his disciples **If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you[.]** And should we expect better treatment than the apostles, who were **made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men[?]** (1 Corinthians 4:9).
- *Expect the persecutions; they have been predicted and promised throughout Scriptures.* **In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.** (John 16:33). Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. (Acts 14:22).
- *Don't be depressed or downcast because of your persecutions and resulting sufferings.* Why? (1) Because you are in reality partaking of Christ's sufferings. And, (2) because fellowship with Christ in his sufferings is connected with fellowship with him in his enjoyments at the revelation of his glory. As to the first, when

you suffer persecutions, you are treading in the steps of Jesus Christ – the man of sorrows acquainted with grief – and you stand in his place, his representative in the earth at that time. **Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body’s sake, which is the church[.]** (Colossians 1:24). As to the second, when Christ appears in glory, we shall be like him, seeing him as he is. **When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory, and he will make those who have been partakers of his suffering exceeding glad in the fellowship of his glory.** (Matthew 25:31). They shall go into life eternal, and conquerors, more than conquerors, to sit down with him on his throne, even as he, when he had overcome, sat down with his Father on his throne. Such are the blessings which await all the faithful at the coming of the Lord; and there is reason to conclude that the measure of the enjoyment and glory of individuals will correspond to the measure of labor and sufferings submitted to in his cause. If we suffer with him, we may be also **glorified together**. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the **glory** which shall be revealed in us. (Romans 8:17, 18; emphasis added). And while commenting on Hebrews 11:35, Benson observes: *A resurrection to a better life than that they were to lose, and a higher reward than they could have received had they not endured these afflictions; seeing the greater their sufferings, the greater would be their felicity and glory hereafter.*

- *Do not be ashamed of your sufferings.* There are sufferings which are disgraceful, such as a murderer, or a thief, or an evil-doer, and so on. The child of God is duty-bound to carefully guard against rendering themselves liable to such sufferings. By exposing himself to legitimate punishment for violation of man’s laws, a Christian could draw down discredit not only on his own character, but on the Christian cause, giving occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme. But though an elect sheep obey man’s law, and live peaceably, tending to his own business, yet he is still likely – indeed surely – to meet with sufferings and persecutions just because he is a professing Christian. A shining example of this is Daniel: **Then said these men, We shall not find any occasion against this Daniel, except we find it against**

him concerning the law of his God. (Daniel 6:5). In other words, there was no legitimate basis in his lifestyle to prosecute Daniel except his religion. Indeed, our Savior specifically told us that we would be **hated of all nations (i.e. Jews and Gentiles) for my name's sake.** (Matthew 24:9). No other basis! And it is the sufferings of this kind, however ignominious in their own character, however fitted to express the contempt of those who inflicted them and excite the shame of those who endure them, that we are not to be ashamed of. There is very much a human inclination to be ashamed of such; thus the need for this specific admonition **let him not be ashamed** (1 Peter 4:16). To close this point, remember this: **Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.** (Mark 8:38). For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he shall come in his own glory, and in his Father's, and of the holy angels. (Luke 9:26).

- *Not only don't be ashamed of such sufferings, but consider them as indeed an honor and a privilege which glorify God.* Be thankful for those sufferings. Submit to them. And be patient in enduring them. **And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.** (Acts 5:41). For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake. (Philippians 1:29; emphasis added). These sufferings are fitted to promote your personal spiritual improvement. **And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope: and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.** (Romans 5:3-5).
- *Know that such sufferings greatly advance the cause of Christ.* It was a common saying that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church. Persecution generally falls out in the furtherance of the gospel. We have seen that. Brown writes that the *patient, joyful endurance of most cruel and contumelious wrongs by Paul*

and Silas, probably was highly influential in producing the conversion of the Philippian jailor. And we know this from 2 Timothy 2:9, 10: Wherein I suffer trouble, as an evil doer, even unto bonds; but the word of God is not bound. Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. Similarly, Paul says whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. (2 Corinthians 1:6).

- *While going through such sufferings, commit your soul to God. Here's the verse: Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator. (1 Peter 4:19). Now you might say we daily commit our souls to God for safe-keeping, which is true. But this seems to connote a special way of doing so, with extra emphasis during times of trial and affliction. To commit our souls to God during persecutions reflects a deep sense of our incapacity to meet and sustain the trial in a way glorifying to God and the need to resign ourselves entirely to the guidance of God's providence. It's a time not to lean on our own understanding but to look to divine wisdom, relying not on our own energies but on the power of God. To that end, these words should be ringing in our ears: Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (2 Timothy 4:17, 18). [Lest there be any doubt about the "lion" reference, recall this passage: Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour[.] (1 Peter 5:8)].*
- *Your "Creator" is at hand during persecution. This unique name of God – "faithful Creator" – applies in times of affliction. God is your Creator. We are not only his creatures, but [o]f his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that*

we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. (James 1:18). And we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10). We are his property. He is able to take care of us. He who made us is able to preserve us. Conservation does not require greater power than creation. And he is disposed to take care of us. He loves us with a peculiar, unchangeable and eternal love.

- *That Creator is “faithful.”* God is not only your Creator, but he is your faithful Creator. He is faithful to perform your expectations of support and protection, which the very relation of Creator is fitted to excite in the mind of an intelligent loyal creature. So the Psalmist proclaims: The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul. The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore. (Psalm 121:7, 8). Your faithful Creator shall deliver you in six troubles: yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee. In famine he shall redeem thee from death: and in war from the power of the sword. Thou shalt be hid from the scourge of the tongue: neither shalt thou be afraid of destruction when it cometh. (Job 5:19-21). And remember this promise directly from the mouth of Jesus Christ: My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand. I and my Father are one. (John 10:27-30). No better description of the faithfulness of our God can be found than what we read from Numbers 23:19: God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? Or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?

Closing this discussion of Christian suffering, I offer Haldane’s on Romans 8:17 (p. 366) – And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.

FINAL POINT – THERE ARE DEGREES IN FAITH.

And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God. (Romans 4:19, 20). The terms "not weak" and "strong" import there are degrees in faith – a doctrine which some deny, but a doctrine which Scripture, in many places, most clearly establishes.

Jesus charges His disciples in general, and at another time Peter particularly, as having little faith. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? (Matthew 6:30). And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus. But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me. And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt? (Matthew 14:29-31). They had faith, but unlike to Abraham's, it was deficient in strength. Degrees of faith!

More proof: Our Lord speaks of the comparatively strong faith of the centurion. When Jesus heard it, he marveled, and said to them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. (Matthew 8:10). The Apostles, addressing Christ, prayed Lord, increase our faith. (Luke 17:5). And the Apostle Paul speaks to this, importing that believers were endowed with different degrees of this gift of faith. For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. (Romans 12:3). Degrees of faith! Expect it; understand it; accept it; love it!

Brethren, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. (Galatians 6:18).