

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 20, Number 23

June 12, 2005



Trusting God When Your Life Depends on the Outcome

For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life: But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us; Ye also helping together by prayer for us, that for the gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons thanks may be given by many on our behalf. (2 Corinthians 1:8-11)

Often Scripture presents us with refreshing and surprising truth. If you were asked to list the surprises that you discover in this passage, what would you say? My first surprise has to do with Paul's authentic and open honesty. Unlike the storefront "perfect" Christians of our time, more a demonstration of carnal pride than of true Christianity, Paul acknowledges that he faced a grave trial that sent him into despair. If someone had noticed Paul during this ordeal and asked him how things were going or if he had a problem that needed prayer, he would not have quickly regrouped and denied any problem with the typical contemporary, "Oh, everything is just fine. I have no problems at all." Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul openly acknowledges that he encountered a major problem greater than his human and natural ability to control. He confesses without apology that it drove him to despair. It touched him at every point of his personal ability and discovered to him that it was greater than his ability.

Our pride-filled contemporary Christian culture seldom discovers God's transcendent power because it is too confused with carnal pride and the compelling need to present a picture-perfect image to others that denies the reality of intense trials, even trials that threaten our survival. To follow Paul's thought, we must look death in the face, and be honest about it, even with others, before we can truly appreciate the power of the resurrection that we have in Christ. The "sentence of death" in us must be carried out before we can possibly learn to appreciate, or even know, God's resurrection power. During past generations of Christians, especially persecuted, suffering Christians, the Biblical truth of the resurrection was a sustaining and relevant truth to life's intense struggles. Christians faced burning at the stake, being eaten

by wild animals, or otherwise being subjected to intense pain, humiliation, and the likely consequence of death itself. For us the surprising truth is that they endured these ordeals with amazing courage and power, courage and power that we intuitively sense is not present in us today. We will acknowledge its absence, but we refuse to look deep into the mirror of Scripture to see ourselves against the model image of the faithful Christian as defined by Scripture alone, a comparison that is essential if we are to come to terms with our deficiency and overcome it. For the typical contemporary Christian the cross is a nice piece of jewelry hung on a chain around the neck or a place marker in the Bible. We refuse to view it as the symbol of death, true death, to self that it communicated dramatically to first century Christians. Die to self? We refuse to consider such a preposterous idea. Such an idea would not enhance our "self-esteem" or do anything beneficial for our reputation among other believers around us. But Paul's point will not let us off the hook. Before we can rejoice in the power of the resurrection, we must face the sentence of death face to face, eye to eye in its glaring reality.

Only as we stand faithful and tall with God in the face of adversity will we ever experience the reality of which Paul writes in this lesson. Paul doesn't blame God for his adversity, but he runs to God for preserving deliverance and strength in the adversity. Only when we have gone through the "valley of the shadow of death" and walked out on the other side with God holding us tightly in His gracious care will we realize the meaning of trusting in God who raises the dead.

For most contemporary Christians trusting God means signing a pledge card or repeating a pathetic memorized prayer of commitment that typically lasts only a few weeks. They typically

view it as something they do altogether for personal benefit. After all, who would want to spend eternity in the lake of fire if they could alter that outcome by such a simple and superficial action? This heretical form of Christianity has come to be known, even among many who practice it but increasingly realize its unbiblical shallowness, as “easy decisionism.”

For Paul trusting in the God who raises the dead was a life-changing concept that stuck with him through the fiercest of trials for the remainder of his life. It was not something that came to him automatically by the signing of a decision card or the repetition of a prayer. He only realized the full impact of this trust when he had faced death eye to eye and by God’s trustworthy and gracious power survived the experience. Only after he had tasted the ugly stench of death and survived to relish the fragrance of a heavenly breeze of divine grace could Paul celebrate the true significance of trusting in God who “raiseth the dead.” For Paul, as for us, the challenge that made such trust so difficult was the natural inclination to trust in self. Only after the episode could Paul begin to confess that this event cultivated him away from self-trust into an incredible trust in God.

Not only did Paul trust God after the fact, that victory of divine grace empowered him to look to the future, unknown and, for him in his day, ominous and full of adversaries, with equal trust. The God who delivered him from his past trials he fully trusted to deliver him from future and unknown trials yet to come. The validity of this trust appears in Second Timothy where Paul fully realizes his imminent death as he sits in a Roman prison pit for months, possibly more than a year. The day he escaped the pit was the day that Rome beheaded him. Yet Second Timothy displays an amazing optimism and an exemplary other-centeredness that only appears in the life of the believer who has lived the death of self and has then lived in excited amazement at the resurrecting power of God in his daily life.

Three years ago I spent three weeks between a life-threatening cancer diagnosis and surgery to remove the tumor in morbid fear. For a long time I struggled with my reaction. Why couldn’t I muster the courage and faith that I had preached for most of my life—and urged others to embrace in their trials? Immediately after the surgery God brought me to that sense of peace and comfort. Why couldn’t I have faced the ordeal with that same comfort before the surgery? I have few absolute answers to such questions for myself or for you in your trials.

Paul’s experience in this lesson, and his transparent openness in confessing to his personal despair, comforts me as I look back at my own relatively minor trial.

I also am learning from this lesson, as well as from the personal experience, that we never gain the upper hand over our trials by pity parties or by blaming other folks for our pain. Paul confessed to a moment of despair, but he did not spend the rest of his life in depression because of the episode. In rather short order, based on the passage, he grew in his faith from a despairing Paul to a comforted and rejoicing Paul.

Several years ago I was approached by a person in his/her (Gender or identity doesn’t matter.) seventies. “I am a victim of child abuse,” was the person’s opening comment to me. We must not minimize the pain or the atrocity of child abuse of any kind, but we must come to more Biblical terms with how we deal with it, as well as with any number of other contemporary horrors of a sin-cursed culture. Like most folks in our culture, this person was living in the past and dwelling on its pain. Is Jesus’ resurrecting power able to heal the wounds of child abuse? I say without hesitation that it has such power and more. A far more Biblical confession might be “I was a victim of child abuse, but God’s power and goodness have delivered and healed me of its wounds.”

Trusting God is a far more amazing event than our superficial Christian culture paints it to be. We have been brainwashed with the idea that trusting God will change where we spend eternity, but it will have negligible impact on the way we face tomorrow’s difficulties. The Biblical description of trusting God is nearly the mirror opposite of this idea. Jesus’ substitutionary and atoning death for our sins is the essential factor in our hope of eternity with God, but a truly Biblical trust in our trustworthy God will transform the way we face tomorrow’s problems. It will also deliver us from every painful disappointment of the past and shift our life focus to a bright future that lies ahead for us, regardless of what our past has been.

The principle point is that we may trust in God when faced with the severest of trials *because He is trustworthy!*

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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