

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 29, Number 8

February 24, 2013



Certain Trials—Certain Joy

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: 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. (1 Peter 4:12–13, KJV 1900)

In our humanistic world, it is sadly predictable that the culture would invade Christian thinking. We see the effects of this invasion in any number of ways, but the most obvious appears when someone suffers. Inevitably, someone says, "It just isn't fair." Or "Why should such a good person have to suffer like this?" Whenever we hear such thoughts, we need to visit Peter's writings and anchor our minds in the lessons that the Holy Spirit guided him to write.

...think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you. Think about the eleventh chapter of Hebrews and the many Old Testament faithful saints who faced suffering. Did Daniel deserve the lion's den? Or did his three friends deserve the fiery furnace? Did any of these men complain about the fairness of their plight? Think about the Book of Acts and the many trials that assaulted the most faithful of saints in the first generation of New Testament faith. Consider Paul's words to the Ephesian elders.

And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there: Save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me. (Acts 20:22-23 KJVP)

Paul traveled to preach the gospel throughout the Mediterranean region. He went because the Holy Spirit "bound" him to go, convicted him, directed him, and made his travels fruitful in the faith. The Holy Spirit didn't coerce him; he described his ministry as a willing one, not coercive. (1 Corinthians 9:7) Only a minister who has felt the powerful conviction of the Holy Spirit, guiding him in the course of his ministry can appreciate Paul's words in this passage. Despite the Holy Spirit's guiding and enriching Paul's travels, the Holy Spirit also reminded Paul that he would face trials and possible imprisonment where ever he went.

...as though some strange thing happened unto you. Jesus reminded the disciples that, if they followed Him faithfully, this world, even the religious elite of their day, would despise them and would persecute them intensely. Relative to the Christian experience of prior ages and cultures, those of us who live in this country today, have never seen the kind of persecution for our faith that has marked so

much of the Christian pilgrimage from the first century forward. Think. Walking in the faith means that we follow Jesus' example. How did many people, possibly the majority of people who met Him, react to Him? They despised Him. They resented that He saw through their pretentious religious claims. They ridiculed His commands to repent and turn from the sinful appetites of their fleshly inclinations. So, if you and I truly follow Him and walk the walk of faith today, why should we expect to be treated any differently? Recently I've enjoyed two of the most invigorating and enlightening discussions with a handful of fellow pastors that I've had in years. I believe that we dug deeper into the Scriptures than any of us had dug in a long time. The study was fruitful and exciting. In both cases, at some point or another in the dialogue, the question arose. How will people in other religious beliefs and denominations react to this teaching? And the conclusion was the same. They'd likely react just about the same way that the leading Jews reacted to Jesus and His teaching. Jesus knew that He taught truth, so He wasn't bothered by their spiteful words. We should embrace more of His outlook, along with more of His actions. If a high official in some religious culture dislikes what we believe, why should we be bothered? They didn't like Jesus' words, did they?

But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings. Jesus suffered for two distinct reasons. From the beginning, He suffered at the hands of wicked people and the religious elite of His day because His sinless life and His clear teaching struck at the heart of their false ideas and their politicizing of their faith. Then, secondly, during a brief moment of intensity beyond our comprehension, He suffered for our sins. Although wicked men tortured His body during this season, all they did to Him didn't prompt a single cry. He felt the pain no less than you or I would feel pain from similar torture. But one amazingly brief moment proved so painful that He cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1 in prophecy around a thousand years earlier, Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34) We cannot participate in His atoning, sacrificial sufferings, but Peter reminds us that faithful godliness shall bring us face to face with His suffering for righteousness sake. (Colossians 1:24) The idea of rejoicing at suffering

cuts against the grain of our natural thinking. This Christian suffering is in no way related to the self-inflicted suffering of the mentally imbalanced. The only way we are able to rejoice in our sufferings in the faith is by the comforts of the Lord of our faith. And we only experience His comforts when we truly follow His example to such an extent that our conduct enrages those around us who refuse to walk in His steps. Paul at one time was just such a persecutor. Read the seventh and ninth chapters of Acts. His "consenting" to the death of Stephen does not mean that he reluctantly allowed the men in his charge to stone Stephen. The implication is that he directly gave them instructions to do so. They stoned that noble saint with Paul's approval. Only when Jesus appeared to Paul in His glory and changed Paul's whole life did the persecuting Saul change into the repentant, serving, preaching Paul. We find the power to rejoice in our sufferings only when we are blessed to realize that we are partaking in His sufferings.

...that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. Peter's context here is not eschatological, teaching about the Second Coming and heaven. It is wholly focused on how we are to conduct our lives in the here and now. While there can be no doubt that all shall see His glory at the Second Coming, we need not wait till that glorious Day. Jesus revealed Himself in His glory to Stephen at the very moment that Stephen was feeling the stones pounding his body to death. On many occasions I have sat by the bedside of godly people who knew they were dying. When the time came, they often displayed more grace than anyone could imagine. How can a mortal experience the flood of peace and joy in the shadow of his death? Ah, when you answer this question, you will begin to understand Peter's teaching in this passage.

People who live their lives in mediocre Christian conduct are not likely to see this glory. Nor are they likely to experience the "...exceeding joy" of which Peter writes in this passage. Think about the record of Stephen's death in Acts 7:57-60. The record describes the reaction of the men who stoned Stephen to his powerful preaching. "...they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth." (Acts 7:54) "They cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord." (Acts 7:57) But don't spend too much time looking at Stephen's murderers. Look at Stephen!

But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, (Acts 7:55 KJVP)

And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:59-60 KJVP)

Do you get any sense that Jesus revealed His glory to Stephen? Indeed He did. And how did Stephen respond to that revelation of Jesus and His glory? Was he not "...glad with exceeding joy"? Here is the amazing truth of Peter's teaching. If we stand as faithfully for our Lord as Stephen did, our Lord's promise to us is no less than His promise to Stephen. The Christian witness through the Dark Ages of Medieval Europe is full of similar experiences, of men, women, and even godly children, who faced every imaginable form of torturous death, but, even as their bodies suffered the pains of that death, they were singing praises to God and rejoicing in Him "...with exceeding joy."

I've heard many believers think aloud about such experiences, only to slip away from the glory of the event by saying, "Oh, but I know I could never endure such sufferings as they did and still praise God and be so full of joy in Him." No! You certainly could not do so. But the power of Him who appeared to Stephen can give you that power. The ability to praise God in the heat of trials does not grow out of a stubborn human will. It comes only from the faithful grace of a loving and merciful God. Hear Paul's own testimony.

I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me. (Philippians 4:13 KJVP)

Paul had no inclination to think that his endurance of trials beyond measure were from his personal willpower or ability. He knew that his ability to endure the hardness of godliness with joy was based on the power of the Lord whom he served.

Do not, however, overlook another point that Paul makes in this context.

I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. (Philippians 4:12 KJVP)

...every where and in all things I am instructed...." "I am instructed" reminds us that Paul didn't coast through life as a mediocre believer and expect to be so blessed in the heat of trial. He had faced trials already, and each trial "instructed" him to know that Jesus' grace was sufficient, just as it is sufficient for you and me, should we ever face such trials. His grace is no less yours in your trials of life. Walk the faith-walk with Him and learn the lessons that Paul learned. You too can find that "Instruction." Are you willing to sit under His teaching and learn?

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor