

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Whom do we Follow?

And who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good? But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled; But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ. (1 Peter 3:13–16, KJV 1900)

Interesting; Peter emphasizes suffering, particularly as a Christian, in this letter, but he also reminds his readers that God insulates them powerfully if they follow Him in good doing, in the "Faith-walk." Both Scripture and Christian history abound with examples of godly people who suffered for their faith, but remained unwavering in that faith. While we especially enjoy reading the early verses of Hebrews 11 regarding Old Testament saints who prevailed through faith, we tend to neglect the later verses that deal with many of those old saints who found God's power through faith to endure incredible suffering. (Hebrews 11:33-38) These passages, and reflection on these and many other saints who suffered and died for their faith, urge us to reflect on Peter's intent in this lesson. By "harm," what does Peter intend? Stephen died for his faith, as did John the baptist. Did they suffer "Harm" in their martyrdom? If we think only in terms of their physical bodies, indeed they suffered harm. However, if we think in terms of their godly faith and of the Lord's rich grace that stood by them in the midst of their trials, we may rightly conclude that they suffered no harm. We sometimes sing a delightful hymn, "Safe in the Arms of Jesus," and safe we are indeed with Him.

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 8:18 KJVP)

We think of Paul and many other New Testament saints who suffered intense persecution for their faith, and we rightly conclude that all their sufferings pale when compared to the glory that they now enjoy in glory with the Lord. As I think about several godly people in my life who have recently suffered the ravages of age and disease, the thought occurs to me that their sufferings fall under this description as well as the martyrs' trials. My friend, take courage. When the trials of life assault you, be they disease, discouragement, or whatever you may suffer (In the closing verses of Romans 8, Paul opens the door widely, "...nor any other creature..."), do not take your heart and faith's

vision off the glory that you shall soon enjoy in glory. Whatever we face in this life, that glory surpasses anything that we here suffer.

Peter conditions this feature of "harm" on the conduct of his readers, "...if ye be followers...." Ananias and Sapphira were members of Jerusalem Church, but they fell into the sin of covetousness, and died for that sin. They suffered harm because they lied to God instead of following that which is good. Paul refers to many in the Corinthian Church who participated in the Lord's Supper, but they did so unworthily; they didn't fully honor the sufferings and death of our Lord for their sins. Paul reminds the Corinthians that, because of this unworthy participation, "...many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep." (1 Corinthians 11:30)

...if ye be followers of that which is good. When Peter questioned Jesus regarding John's future, Jesus rebuked him gently, "...what is that to thee? Follow thou me." (John 21:22) His word to Peter was simple. Regardless of whatever others may suffer or enjoy, our single obligation to Him is to follow Him through whatever we face. Almost eleven years ago, I faced life-threatening cancer. According to the surgeon, I was literally a few weeks away from its spreading out of control. Despite dreadful fear leading up to my surgery, I awoke from the surgery with a powerful sense of assurance from the Lord that, whatever I faced, He would be with me. Given the success of the procedure, it is easy for me to look back and thank the Lord for that moment of powerful assurance. However, in the years since that moment, I have come to realize that, even if I had faced the darkest outcome of the disease, the Lord's goodness would have been just as powerful and just as real for me. ***His goodness was not contingent on my recovery.***

...happy are ye. Peter makes a point that we seldom consider. While dealing with the topic of suffering, Peter reminds us of one of life's most basic realities. Regardless our path or choices, suffering in this life is certain. Peter emphasizes that we may suffer as a Christian, or we may suffer as a sinner; in his words, "as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other

men's matters." (1 Peter 4:15b) How we choose to live predicts how we suffer, but nothing we do can avoid it. I've observed a few believers in my life who suffered and complained bitterly that their suffering was unfair, or they were being persecuted for righteousness, though careful examination revealed that their unwise actions brought on much of their suffering. Folks, there is a world of difference between being a martyr and embracing a "Martyr complex," conveniently claiming to suffer for righteousness when in fact we are suffering for our sinful conduct. One is real; the other is a counterfeit. Peter makes an enlightening point. When a person suffers as a Christian, "...**happy are ye.**" When a person suffers for his ego or for his bad conduct and claims the "Martyr" card, he is miserable and complaining. He quickly reminds all who will listen of how unfairly he has been treated. When a person suffers for righteousness, Peter, directed by the Holy Spirit, tells us "...happy are ye."

...and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled. Godly living does not prevent trouble or even "terror" from us. It rather transforms the way we face those trials.

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory; **While we look** not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen *are* temporal; but the things which are not seen *are* eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:17 KJVP; emphasis added)

The same affliction which might seem unbearable in our own strength becomes light with the Lord's grace. Do not overlook that, like Peter, Paul adds a contingency to this glorious attitude. "While we look...." When affliction, pressures, and trials, invade your life, where do you look? If you look at the source of the trial, your burden will seem unbearable, and you'll likely protest loudly about how unfairly you are being treated. If you look at "...things which are not seen," at things eternal, whatever the affliction, it becomes light. I have been amazed on several occasions over the years to witness godly people as they faced death. They enjoyed life and lived it fully. When they realized that their time was drawing near, they increasingly showed grace that set them apart. They exemplified incredible peace and joy, not dread or fear. I've also seen a few people face death's hour in fear. Both Peter and Paul in the verses we here examine explain this difference. Where are we looking? As we face the trial, do we focus on the trial and look only at it, or do we look past the trial to the Lord and to the many "eternal" things that He has prepared for them that love Him? Where we look determines and predicts our state of mind.

Oh how easily the terrors of this sinful, broken world overwhelm our thoughts and leave us in

paralyzed fear. But we have a better way to face life's perilous moments. If we steadfastly keep our hearts and faith's vision set on our Lord, we find the strength to "...be nor afraid of their terror."

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)

At the time of this verse, Stephen is being stoned for his faith. Where did he look? And how did he react to the incredible suffering that those stones heaped upon his body? The ancient practice of stoning did not involve throwing small pebbles at the person. Little pebbles would sting quite enough to torture us. Think of a rock that weighs five or ten pounds. Imagine a strong adult throwing that stone at your head as hard as he could throw it. Perhaps the first few stones might not hit their target, your head. Instead, they'd hit your legs, your stomach, or your shoulders. No doubt the blow would be sufficient to cause deep, painful bruising. Likely it would also break some bones. You'd suffer any number of such blows before someone would finally throw the stone that finds its target, your head, and death would end your suffering. It is this torture that Stephen endures as he utters the words in the passage. What were Stephen's dying words?

And cast *him* out of the city, and stoned *him*: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul. And they stoned Stephen, calling upon *God*, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. (Acts 7:58 KJVP)

Do we sense any fear in Stephen's words? Does he seem troubled? No. And the answer becomes clear from Peter's and Paul's words in the verses that we've examined here. Stephen is steadfastly looking at things that his wicked executioners could not see. He doesn't fear death. He seems amazingly oblivious to the dreadful pain in his body. But he is conscious of only one thing. Amazing as it seems to us, not only does he rise above the pain of stones to see His Lord, standing to receive him into glory, but he prays for the Lord not to lay the sin of his executioners to their charge. Scripture records that the crowd was supervised by a man named Saul, whom we later come to know as Paul. Stephen prayed for Paul while he hated "This way" and persecuted it to the death.

Where are you looking? Ah where indeed? Where you look predicts how you react to the trial.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor