

November 10, 2013

# *A Gospel Centered Community*

## *Future Glory*

**Romans 8:15 – 18**

This Sunday marks the International Day of Prayer for the persecuted church around the world and we are taking time out from our study in Acts to do just that. First we'll look at this passage in Romans to see what it tells us about the suffering of believers and then we'll spend some time praying for our brothers and sisters around the world who find themselves in the crucible of suffering. As we have been moving through the book of Acts, the thing that stands out, and will continue to stand out is the ongoing saga of suffering and persecution that comes to those who are followers of Jesus Christ. It begins with the humiliation and torture and death on a cross of the founder of the faith; and from the stoning of Stephen and the execution of James, it has continued relentlessly for two thousand years. In fact, more Christians have been martyred in the last century than in all other centuries combined. This year alone, more than 200 million Christians will face persistent oppression and unrelenting persecution because of their faith, and many thousands will die for the sake of the gospel.

For seventy years, the communist government of the Soviet Union attempted to stamp out Christianity within its borders. Church buildings were shuttered or destroyed; believers were persecuted and harassed; bibles were confiscated and many hundreds of thousands were imprisoned and killed. And there are many stories that have come out of that time, but one of those has really made an impact on me. A Ukrainian believer tells the story of when he was a young boy and his father was arrested by the authorities because he was a believer: *"I remember the day like it was yesterday. My father put his arms around me and my sister and my brother and guided us into the kitchen to sit around the table where he could talk with us. My mama was crying, so I knew that something was wrong. Papa didn't look at her because he was talking directly to us. He said, 'Children, you know that I am the pastor of our church. That's what God has called me to do – to tell others about Him. I have learned that the communist authorities will come tomorrow to arrest me. They will put me into prison because they want me to stop preaching about Jesus. But I cannot stop doing that because I must obey God. I will miss you very much, but I will trust God to watch over you while I'm gone.'"*

*"He hugged each one of us. Then he said: 'All around this part of the country, the authorities are rounding up followers of Jesus and demanding that they deny their faith. Sometimes, when they refuse, the authorities will line up whole families and hang them by the neck until they are dead. I don't want that to happen to our family, so I am praying that once they have put me in prison, they will leave you and your mother alone.'"*

*"'However,' and here he paused and made eye contact with us, 'If I am in prison, and I hear that my wife and my children have been hung to death rather than deny Jesus, I will be the most proud man in that prison!'"* How do you learn to live like that? How do you learn to die like that?

The Bible is clear that if you are a follower of Jesus, you will face persecution. On the one hand persecution is completely avoidable. All you have to do is leave Jesus alone – don't follow Him – don't talk about Him – and don't gather together with those who do. But through the years, the gospel has triumphed precisely because that is not an option for real followers of Jesus. As we saw after Paul was stoned in Lystra for preaching the gospel and left for dead, he encourages the believers on his way back through by saying, *'...through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.'* In other words, this is normal – this is expected – this is sovereign.

God has designed that persecution and suffering serve His purpose of global evangelism. And the question this raises is: How do we persevere in the faith given that we will be hated by all men, as Jesus says; given that suffering and tribulation will mark our path; given that we are to follow in the footsteps of the One who gave His life for us by being willing to give our lives for the sake of the gospel? How does a father get to the place where he can tell his wife and children that it is far better for them to be hung for their faith than to prosper in apostasy? And at least part of the answer is in the passage we read this morning, where Paul says, *'For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.'* In other words, there is something future that makes all the trouble today seem like nothing. ***The promise of future glory is greater than the pain of present suffering.***

So what is **the promise of future glory**? Let's look at the text: *For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"* Romans 8:15 First of all you have to know that this promise is only for those who are children of God. It is not a promise for anyone else. Believing the gospel, believing in Jesus, the Son of God, is how we get into the family of God. The gospel tells us that we were created in the image and likeness of God the Father, but that image was ruined by sin. We come into this world not as children of God but children of wrath, conceived in sin, destined for hell. We are by nature enemies of God, hostile to Him, preferring and choosing our own way over His, and headed for eternal damnation. But God, being rich in mercy, intervenes in our lives, arrests our headlong race to hell with the good news of the gospel, that tells us of His only Son, sent to earth to live as one of us, nailed to the cross to die for our offenses, buried for three days in a tomb, and raised to life for our salvation. And when we own our sin and repent of our rebellion, we are adopted into the family of God as sons of God and we cry, 'Abba Father'.

And the reason we know that we are His children and no longer children of wrath is that the Holy Spirit within us testifies to that fact: *The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,* Romans 8:16 The Spirit brings about a response in our hearts to the love of God that cries out, "Abba! Father!" The witness of the Holy Spirit that you are a child of God is the creation *in* you of affections for God. Formerly you had no taste for the things of God – now you can't get enough. Before you believed the gospel you asked yourself what was best for you – now you trust your heavenly Father to give you what is best for you. Before you went your own way – now you cry 'Abba Father'.

And then comes the incredible promise for those who are sons of God: *and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ* Romans 8:17a Those who belong to God are His heirs, and co-heirs with His Son. The fact that we are heirs implies inheritance. So what is the inheritance for those who believe? First of all Romans 4:13 tells us that we are **heirs of the world**. If you are an heir of God, then you will inherit what is God's and God owns the world – *'The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains, the world and those who dwell in it.'* Psalm 24:1 And God says to His Son, *'Ask of Me and I will give You the nations as Your inheritance and the very ends of the earth as Your possession.'* Psalm 2:8 Since we are heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, we share in the Son's inheritance.

So what does that mean practically? At the very least that means when you become a child of God through faith in Christ – everything that exists will serve your good. Nothing in all creation will be able to trump either your joy or frustrate your destiny. All things serve you in the end – even the negative things. Ultimately, God does not only defeat every enemy of your good, but makes your enemies into your servants. You only have to read the last paragraph of this chapter to see this: *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?...Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.* Romans 8:31-37

But if we rejoice only that our inheritance is the things that God has made, we would be idol worshipers – idolators. When Abraham was bemoaning the fact that his only heir was Eliezer of Damascus, God appeared to him and said – 'Not so Abraham – ***I am your shield and your very great reward***'. In other words, **God Himself** is our inheritance. In Romans 5 Paul says that believers exult in the hope of the glory of God, and furthermore their rejoicing is in God. Not in things – in God. The great joy of our hope is that one day we will see and revel in the glory of God Himself – not in the gifts of God, or the things of God – but in God. This is our great inheritance – God Himself! O how we need to cultivate an appetite and taste for Him – O taste and see that the Lord is good! If He is not precious to you – then you are a stranger to your inheritance. If you love His gifts, think on how wonderful the Giver must be. It will cause you to sing with the psalmist: *My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my inheritance forever.* Psalm 73:26

The third element of our inheritance is **a redeemed and glorified body**. Look at the next few verses in Romans 8: *For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.* Romans 8:22-23 This is not merely a body that is free from sin and all the effects of sin. This is not just a tear-free, pain-free, sickness-free, eternally healthy body. This is a body that can fully enjoy all the inheritance of God in the next world without all the selfishness and idolatry, sickness and sorrow of this world. We will share in the glory of God in the sense that we are conformed to the image of His Son to enjoy God and His gifts as the Son now does.

But all of this is contingent on the rest of verse 17: *provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him.* **Romans 8:17b** We are heirs of God and fellow-heirs of Christ – provided that – contingent upon – our suffering with Him. In the larger sense, I would say that this suffering is all the groaning and sorrow and heartache that come from what Paul calls the futility of this age. All the persecution, calamity, disease and death that are the effects of sin in this world, that God nevertheless uses for our good and His glory. But even more I believe the suffering here is the suffering we must endure as followers of Jesus. The Bible is clear – *'All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.'* 2 Timothy 3:12 The Bible is clear – we are inheritors with Christ insofar as we suffer with Christ.

So what does it mean to suffer with Him? When you boil it all down, I believe it means that whatever we go through, whatever trouble comes our way, we never lose sight of the fact that God loves us as a Father loves His children and that all our circumstances are designed to conform us more and more into the image of His Son and to bring Him glory. We must hold on to the fact that everything God allows or engineers that looks like suffering in our lives is designed to wean our hearts away from the comforts and securities and pleasures of this life and fix our hearts and affections on our inheritance in the next. We need to view this life as a journey to receiving an incredible inheritance in the next. John Newton put it this way: 'Suppose a man was going to New York to take possession of a large estate, and his carriage should break down a mile before he got to the city which obliged him to walk the rest of the way on foot. What a fool we would think him, if we saw him wringing his hands and blubbering out all the remaining mile, 'My carriage is broken! My carriage is broken!'

*'For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.'* In other words, there is something future that makes all the trouble today seem like nothing. **The promise of future glory is greater than the pain of present suffering.** No one has a greater appreciation for this than those who are persecuted, tortured and killed for the sake of Christ. And yet invariably, as men and women from groups like Open Doors and Voice of the Martyrs manages to interview those who are being persecuted, the first request is always the same: **"Pray for us"**

When Nik Ripken spoke at a secret conference of the leaders of the underground church in China – a church where hundreds of thousands have been discriminated against, denied jobs and promotions, put in prison and even killed – one young woman asked him, *'Since Jesus is known in other countries, are the believers there persecuted like we are?'* Nik then began to relate all the stories of the persecuted church in the Muslim countries in which he had worked for many years. The next morning he was awakened by screaming and shouting and crying in the conference compound. Thinking that the Chinese security forces were conducting a raid, he rushed outside. There he saw the Chinese house-church leaders and evangelists scattered around the compound grounds, lying or sitting on the ground, crying, screaming and groaning. Many of them were even pulling their hair or clutching at their clothes. He asked his interpreter what in the world was happening. With tears in his eyes, David, his interpreter turned to him and said 'They were so moved by what you shared last night about believers who were truly persecuted, that they have vowed before God that they will get up an hour earlier every morning to pray for those Muslim believers you told them about until Jesus is known in those countries'.

The writer of Hebrews tells the church to *'Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.'* **Hebrews 13:3** Prayer is the most necessary action, the greatest gift, the hardest spiritual labor, as well the simplest cry of a loving heart. The time that you spend in prayer has an eternal impact on the lives of men and women throughout the world. Through prayer believers are strengthened, closed doors are opened, resistant hearts are made receptive, leaders are put down and raised up, the works of the devil are destroyed and the kingdom of God is extended.

*Sovereign God,*

*We worship You and rejoice that You know all of those who suffer in Your name. We remember those who are imprisoned for their faith and ask that they, like the Apostle Paul, would be able to see that their chains have helped to further the gospel, not frustrated by them. May they inspire and embolden their fellow believers to speak the Word of God more courageously and fearlessly.*

*God of all comfort, for those who are tortured both in body and mind, give them the grace to endure and to see their suffering as part of following in Christ's footsteps.*

*Merciful God, for those asked to pay the ultimate price – who are martyred because of their love for You – may they truly know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in his death.*

*Father God, for those who are widowed and orphaned as a result of persecution, may they know the comfort that comes from Your presence. May they be strengthened by Your Spirit, enabled to rejoice like the psalmist as they proclaim that the Lord will not abandon in death those He loves.*

*Heavenly Father, we ask that You would make us ever mindful of our brothers and sisters around the world who need us to stand with them as they suffer in Your name. Teach all of us what it means to overcome by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of our testimony; we pray that we would not love our lives so much as to shrink from death. In the name of Your beloved Son, O Lord, hear our prayer. Amen.*