

GLORYING IN INFIRMITIES

The pathway which leads to the Kingdom of Heaven is truly a wearisome one that brings vexations which cause the hands to fail and the knees to grow feeble (Heb 12:12,13). It is one that will lead those who journey along it through many experiences, both joyful and sorrowful. It will take its traversers to great spiritual heights – and yet also to the deepest depths of despair, through the valley of the shadow of death (Ps 23). To ascend to those heights involves the exertion of much energy – yet to descend to the depths of sorrow is easily accomplished when the mind wanders, the faith weakens and the feet slip, and nothing is found at hand to halt one's falling. To walk along the pathway to the Kingdom of Heaven requires great courage and determination, for there will be times when the road will only lead us into apparent trouble from which there seems no escape ... and then out of it again when the way through the trial (1Cor 10:13) is eventually found. It will bring us through many vexing tribulations (Acts 14:22), and temptations (Jas 1:2,12); and into the contempt of those onlookers who just cannot understand why we have chosen such a difficult path in life, when there is a broader, easier way, that most other people choose (Rom 3:12).

There are others however, who, in beholding our patient endurance in times of evil, realise that we do it for a purpose. The purpose is, that the end is in view (Heb 11:13) and the reward is so glorious that any amount of tribulation becomes worthwhile - for concerning he who overcomes, the Christ has promised: "To him ... will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in His Throne" (Rev 3:21). And when we look to Jesus, the commencer and perfecter of our faith, we look to one who himself endured suffering, that he might inherit glory. In him, we behold the supreme example of faithfulness and endurance through trial and tribulation. He, despising the shame, endured the contradiction of sinners against himself, and endured the cross for the vision of Joy that was set before him – the joy of being enthroned at his Father's right hand (Ps 16:11). So it is, that we also forsake all, that we may follow after him, bearing the burden he bore, even the cross; for he has commanded: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it." (Luke 9:23,24).

THE GREATEST LOVE

It was said by the Master: "greater love hath no man than this, than a man lay down his life for his friends" (Jno 15:13). And his friends we are, if we do whatsoever things he has commanded us to do (v 14). Yet it is also testified of Christ that he died for the ungodly: "When we were yet without strength, in due time Christ *died for the ungodly*. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commandeth his love toward us, in that, *while we were yet sinners*, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:6,8). Here is a fundamental principle which ought never leave our minds; Christ came not to save them that are whole, but to heal the sick (Luke 5:31). It was "not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent His son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1Jno 4:10). Here then, are the friends of the Son of the Most High – not those who are the righteous in their own eyes, but the "ungodly" whom he laid down his life for. That is, those who were once the ungodly, dead in their trespasses and sins; but who, having received the testimony concerning him, have obeyed the Gospel in submitting themselves to the baptism he commanded.

Herein is love – concerning which there can be no greater – than that a man should lay down his life for his friends. But the friends of Christ; the publicans and sinners that have been

brought to repentance, must do as he did – in reciprocating Divine Love, they lay down their lives for the One who bought them with his own shed blood. They lay down their lives in the aqueous grave of Baptism, and rise again to a new state of existence, wholly devoted to the doing of the commandments of their Friend and Elder Brother. They submit themselves to him in love, taking up the cross, bearing a burden like to that which he bore – yet less intense; the burden of warring against the flesh in all its aspects, from the tempter within, to the scorners without.

THE APOSTLE PAUL

The Apostle Paul is an example of such a man. He first appears in the record as a blasphemer and a persecutor of those who walked in The Way (1 Tim 1:13; Acts 8:1, 3; 9:2). Such was his zeal as an unregenerate Jew, that he persecuted the ecclesia of Christ (Phil 3:6) beyond measure (Gal 1:3). Being of the Tribe of Benjamin, he truly ravened as a wolf (Gen 49:27), seeking to devour the flock of God. Yet, when the shining brightness of Glory appeared to him on his journey along the road to Damascus – a journey designed to secure the death of more disciples (Acts 9:2), the wolf fell to the ground as a lamb, with all meekness and teachableness: “he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (Acts 9:6). Here is true repentance indeed; a disposition seldom found in those of our day who claim to have been “converted”, with a “road to Damascus experience”. “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” is the humble and contrite enquiry of all those who desire to forsake the ways of the flesh, and do the Will of God. The Light of the Glorious Gospel of Christ shone in his heart, illuminating it with a knowledge of the Lord Jesus, that he might become a chosen vessel, the excellency of the power being of God, not himself (cp 2 Cor 4:6, 1 Cor 15:10). He was struck with blindness, that the eyes of his understanding might be opened (Acts 9:8), that his zeal might be redirected, and that he might be diverted from his path of slaughter and persecution, to traverse the narrow way that he once sought to destroy.

What a most remarkable conversion we have presented to us in this man! And what a remarkable disposition and flexibility of mind we behold in such an one who turned from being a persecutor to be one of those persecuted (1 Cor 4:12). Once seeking to destroy those who professed the Name of Christ, he became one who endured all things, and suffered all things for that Name. So he testified in the chapter which forms the third portion of our daily readings for today, 2 Corinthians 12:

“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” (verse 10).

What a strange thing this is for men of the flesh to consider! A man who takes pleasure in persecutions and distresses! But the pleasure was not in those experiences themselves; rather it was because he was enduring them “for Christ’s sake”. Days of evil and tribulation are divinely appointed for those who would become the sons of the Most High; hence it is written:

“my son, despise not the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him; for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons, for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?” (Heb 12:5-7)

And again:

“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 Pet 4:12-13).

There is, therefore, great reason to rejoice in infirmities and times of adversity – such experiences, difficult though they be to bear at times, are actually tokens of the Father’s love for us! And when tribulations come through our adherence to the ways of the Most High, and through our refusal to depart from the Way of Life (even if for a convenient season till the time of temptation be passed), we have great cause for rejoicing, inasmuch that being partakers of those things that Christ suffered at the hands of those he came to save, we are assured that we will also be partakers of the glory yet to be revealed.

Truly it is, therefore, that the Master declared: “my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Mat 11:30). It may well be that the yoke and the burden of bearing the cross of Christ may well be grievous to the flesh; but by comparison with the exceeding great weight of glory yet to be revealed, such things become but very light things:

“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 Cor 4:17,18).

This is the reason therefore, that we choose a more narrow, and more difficult way than the way of all flesh. Here is why we choose to bear the yoke of Christ, and traverse down a way of trials, temptations, distress and vexation. It is for the joy of the reward that is set before us. It is because we walk by faith, and not by sight; and through faith we behold our Lord Jesus, as the forerunner, having entered into glory before us. Fixing our focus upon him, as with the Apostle Paul, we are not wearied, though the flesh be weak. Rather, we endure all things joyfully for the sake of he who suffered for us; “we are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, yet not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor 4:8-11).

Let us therefore, not faint, nor be discouraged in the way, but rather, as we consider the things pertaining to the Sacrifice of Christ whom we remember this day, let us “lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; and make straight paths for our feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but rather let it be healed” (Heb 12:12). Whatever experiences may befall us, we remain confident and assured that so long as we firmly resolve to remain on the Way of Life - come what may - we shall indeed reach the destination we so earnestly long for. So long as we are willing to follow the Way of our Master, there will be times of shame to be despised, yet so long as we, as he, endure it patiently, looking to the end of the reward, the victory is guaranteed. And being amongst the great company of those who overcome, we shall be granted the coronal wreaths of victory, and invited to sit with the Slain Lamb in his Throne, even as he overcame and is now seated at the Right Hand of Power.

Christopher Maddocks