

An Overcomer's Life of Affliction

By

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(Sabbath Sermon, 8th March, 2014)

Desperation Drives Us to a Purer Faith

Has any problem ever brought you to your knees because it's so severe and seemingly beyond your human ability to bear, much less survive it?

Life as it is, you may one day experience such a difficult time. In the throes of such extreme difficulty, don't ever forget your real power. And don't forget to go down on your knees before that power. He saves no matter the situation.

In 2 Cor. 1:8-10, the apostle Paul relates a personal experience where his human strength and resources were stretched to the limit – to the point of hopelessness – but God proved a great Saviour. He wrote:

⁸ 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:

⁹ But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead:

¹⁰ Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that He will yet deliver us (2 Cor. 1:8-10).

Paul compares his experience in Asia to a “sentence of death”, an experience so dire and unbearable he despaired of life. He lost all hope for living. He thought his end had come. But God changed the ending from a tragedy into a happy testimony.

The lifetime lesson he and his co-workers learnt was that it was futile to trust in themselves but a great salvation experience to trust in God who raises the dead!

In recalling the event (which the Corinthian brethren probably knew already), the apostle was not being hyperbolic. The experience was really scary! He had stirred a hornets' nest at the nerve centre of the cult of Artemis, the great Diana (Latin) of the Ephesians! Through the demonstration of the power of God (in healing the sick and casting out demons even by aprons sent to sick folk!), he had made the people see the vanity and hollowness of a goddess who was reputed to be so powerful yet lacking in real effectual power to improve the lives of people as well as prove its worth in the face of the power of the gospel.

The cult of Artemis was a huge business. Replicas of her great temple at Ephesus – one of the seven wonders of the ancient world – sold like hot cakes, and the silversmiths who

fabricated them made great gain from them. But now through this Paul, Artemis no longer held unchallenged sway; she no longer pulled the crowds! People were rather burning their occult books and becoming Christians in droves. The silversmiths who made the miniature shrines of Artemis saw their sales plummeting, but they seemed unable to reverse the situation. One of them, a Demetrius (most likely the leader of the guild), was not one to sit on the fence, however. He determined to stop the advance of the Christian faith. He knew how to stir a crowd.

One afternoon, he incited the people to rage against the Christian missionaries in the city. In a fiery speech, he extolled the greatness of Artemis throughout Asia but who this Paul was subverting—and therefore their business—by claiming she was not real but an image made with hands. Demetrius worked the whole city into frenzy, and pandemonium broke out. The people charged down the streets, chanting “Great is the Diana of the Ephesians”. (And we could almost hear a section of the crowd chanting in response, ‘Down with Paul!’)

According to the account in Acts 19, “the whole city was filled with confusion”. Two of Paul’s travelling companions Gaius and Aristarchus were seized by the rowdy crowd who bundled them into the theatre apparently to mete out instant justice to them. Then they seized Alexander, a Jew, anti-Semitism adding fuel to the flames!

The Apostle himself sought to make an appearance in the crowd, but he was prevailed upon by both the disciples and unbelieving friends among the Ephesian nobility not to venture. The mob were like a people possessed—overcome with so much anger and hatred they wouldn’t just simmer down! For two hours after they caught Alexander, the Jew, they cried out in a deafening cacophony, “Great is the Diana of the Ephesians! Great is the Diana of the Ephesians!!”

It took the clever, disarming talk of the town clerk to calm them down and restore sanity, reminding them of the legal avenue opened to Demetrius and his craftsmen under Roman law to have their case heard. Otherwise, he said, the whole assembly risked being charged with disturbing the peace.

Paul and his co-workers were saved by the skin of their teeth!

Up to the time he wrote 2nd Corinthians, he still recalled their experience that day in Ephesus with trepidation. They faced certain death that day, but God who raises the dead saved them with a great salvation, and He will yet save!

Just as befell the apostle Paul, some difficulties we encounter in life can test us to the limits of our human abilities and endurance—to the point where we consider ourselves as dead men and in fact begin to look forward to our end. It can be business-related such as a huge, engulfing debt; it can be a deadly sickness or other extreme difficulty of ultra-human proportions. But through it all, let’s look to God Almighty; He will deliver us and does deliver all the time!

A Prophet Tells God — Give Me Death!

He was a redoubtable prophet and a miracle performer. He raised the dead, shut the heavens from giving rain and after 3¹/₂ years prayed to break the drought. He even called down fire upon his enemies. But on one occasion this prophet called upon God to take away his life.

Prophet Elijah was simply sick and tired of living; the situation in which he found himself was unbearable. He was a fugitive and a quarry; the whole power of the state was out to get him. Everywhere he found himself in the fiefdom of Jezebel and her henpecked husband, King Ahab, his life hung in the balance.

It was just days since Elijah put 450 prophets of the sun-god Baal to death in the wake of his victory over them in their 'who is God' contest on Mount Carmel. The rules of the contest were fairly simple. Each side (Baal devotees represented by 450 priests versus YHWH followers represented by Elijah) was to pray for their God to send down fire to consume their sacrifice. "And the God that answereth by fire let him be God" (1 Kings 18:20-24).

The prophets of Baal called on their god and performed all their rituals from morning till late afternoon (at "the time of the evening sacrifice", 3pm), but there was no response whatsoever. Then Elijah "repaired the altar of YHWH that was broken down", dug a trench around it, had the altar and the trench drenched in water. And then called upon the Elohim of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, and there was an instant response: "... the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench" (vv. 30-38).

A feeling of awe and wonder descended on the people and they bowed in worship, muttering, "YHWH He is God, YHWH He is God" (v. 39).

With Yahweh established as the true God, Baal-worship had no reason for being; it was a fraud. And so were his prophets. They too had no reason for being. So victorious Elijah gave the order, "Take the prophets of Baal", he said to the people, "let not one of them escape. And they took them: and brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there" (v. 40).

Shortly afterwards, Elijah prayed for the heavens to give rain after withholding rains for 3¹/₂ years!

But the powerful wife of King Ahab, Jezebel, the patron of Baal-worshippers, was neither impressed by the fire Elijah called down from heaven nor the rains that watered the parched earth in direct answer to his prayer.

She was in a retaliatory mood. She sought to avenge the deaths of her false prophets:

¹ And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and withal how he had slain all the prophets with the sword.

² Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to morrow about this time (1 Kings 19:1-2).

Jezebel had, to all intents and purposes, issued a ‘fatwa’ (an execution order) against Prophet Elijah. From then on, Elijah was an outlaw—on the run from Jezebel who had the power of the state behind her. He was hungry, deserted and alone. He sought refuge in the wilderness, but the solitude of the wilderness was no solace. His life was under constant threat either way. In the city, Jezebel’s goons hunted for his life; in the wilderness, hunger and thirst, the lack of shelter and the menace of predatory animals equally put him at risk.

For the long-suffering prophet, life was not worth living any more. Out of sheer desperation he cried to God: “O LORD, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers” (v. 4).

His outburst, his desperate cry, was not an expression of unbelief. Prophet Elijah still believed in the sovereignty of God – that He was in control no matter what. That was why he prayed for God to allow him to join his dead ancestors. Even if, he would die, he believed, God will have to will it! But why death? He simply meant he had had enough. Life had been a bitter experience for him, and he wanted to call it a day!

Thankfully, God did not share his pessimism. He is in control (as he rightly believed) to bring about the good, not the evil, for the positive not the negative. Thus God didn’t give Elijah what he thought was going to befall him; He showed him His power of deliverance and kindness: an angel appeared to him and strengthened him with heavenly food and heavenly words. Above all, God made his life worth much more: He commissioned him to anoint two new kings over Syria and Israel and his successor, Elisha (1 Kings 19:15-16).

The best part of all is that Elijah never got the death he looked for –for “Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven” (2 Kings 2:11).

Deliverance in the Nick of Time!

Beloved, when the going gets tough and you are doing what is right in the sight of God and praying and seeking His face, don’t expect the worst; expect the best. What you fear but oddly look forward to all the same, because it seems inevitable to you, will not come to pass. God will replace it with a blessing; the affliction is about to give way to joy. The promise of our faithful God is that He won’t allow us to be tried beyond our ability to endure but that He will provide us a way of escape:

There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it (1 Cor. 10:13).

Deliverance is in sight at every point when a problem appears to be unbearable and absolutely overwhelming. If you were among the Israelites that day, huddled together in fright by the banks of the Red Sea as the Egyptian army charged at you, wouldn't you have thought you were a goner just as they thought? But actually your fears were misplaced and Moses was right—"The LORD shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace" (Ex. 14:14). What was about to happen was not your imminent destruction but your imminent deliverance. The mass annihilation (at the hands of Pharaoh's army) which seemed so inevitable turned out to be rejoicing on the other side of the riverbank as the dead bodies of the Egyptians floated on the water. YHWH is a DELIVERER!

When it gets darkest, don't fear, it's just before dawn! As the Apostle Paul declares in 2nd Tim. 4:18, "... the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto His heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

The LORD delivers; that is His stock-in-trade. He delivers from "every evil work" now until the greatest deliverance of all is wrought—our entrance into His Kingdom.

Make Him your trust. Don't let anything shake your faith; let nothing overwhelm you. Our God delivers all the time. Don't let the dire circumstances you find yourself in determine your level of faith. Whether the valley is as deep as the sea depths or the mountain is as tall as Mount Everest (the world's tallest mountain), it's not beyond the power of God to give you the victory. Continue to believe even when it's bleakest; a new dawn of hope and deliverance is about to break on you. As the Psalmist sang, "weeping may endure for a moment, but joy cometh in the morning" (Ps 30:5).

There is a fall, but there's always a lifting up (Job 22:29). The righteous is not destined to remain on the ground after a fall but to rise up again and again after each stumble (Prov. 24:16).

The LORD is our light every dark hour. Neither a fall nor darkness will hold us down:

Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy: when I fall, I shall arise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD shall be a light unto me" (Micah 7:8).

Halleluiah!