

Strength in Trials

In October 2009, Iranian pastor Youcef Nadarkhani was arrested for “turning his back on Islam” and “converting Muslims to Christianity.” In September 2010, Nadarkhani was found guilty of “apostasy” and sentenced to death by hanging.

Still imprisoned, this thirty-two year-old husband and father of two will be executed unless he denounces his faith in Christ and returns to Islam. According to Iran's judiciary, Nadarkhani's execution has been delayed because they want time to "use whatever means necessary to cause him to convert to Islam."

A council member of Pastor Nadarkhani's church reported that the Iranian court has given the pastor four opportunities to recant his faith. Nadarkhani can reject Christ and live or stand firm in his Christian faith and be hung. All four times Nadarkhani refused to deny Jesus.

(Read more about this ongoing story of persecution at FoxNews.com and ChristianPersecution.info.)

When you hear stories like this one – Christians facing persecution for their faith – how does it make you feel? Are you encouraged in your faith or discouraged?

Paul's Suffering

In our introductory lesson several weeks ago, we learned Paul wrote Ephesians from a Roman prison. One of his purposes in writing this letter to the Christians in Ephesus was to make sure *his* suffering did not discourage them in their commitment to Christ (3:13).

Paul's commitment to the message of Christ brought him great earthly suffering, but he refused to turn back. Before we get into the third chapter of Ephesians, let's take a brief look at Paul's adversity to set the stage.

Read 2 Corinthians 11:23-33. List all the hardships Paul faced. (Note: Taken out of context it might seem like Paul is boasting. Instead he is combating false teachers who have used their “credentials” to lead many in the church astray.)

How did Paul view these trials and persecutions? Read Romans 5:1-5 and Philippians 3:7-11 to help with your answer.

Scripture clearly teaches that believers *will* face trials, difficulties, and even persecution. Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33) and the world will hate us because it hates Him (John 15:18). So we shouldn’t be surprised when we encounter trouble. In fact, we should prepare for it, expect it, and “count it all joy!”

Read James 1:2-4 and 1 Peter 1:3-7. According to these two passages, how can God use trials in the lives of His children?

How can knowing these biblical truths about trials prepare us to face them?

Understanding the nature of trials is vital for standing firm in tumultuous times. Paul and the Ephesians had to face them. We have to face them. Will we allow God to use them for our spiritual growth or will we waste them? Like Paul encouraged the Ephesians, let’s encourage one another to stand firm in trials and rejoice in what God will do through them.

Now back to Ephesians!

Paul’s God-given Ministry

Read Ephesians 3:1-13.

When Jesus intercepted Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), He not only saved Paul, He also called him to ministry. Paul used the term “mystery” to describe a “secret plan” God made clear to Paul and commanded him to carry out.

According to Ephesians 3:6, what is this “mystery?”

Reread 3:7-9 and describe Paul's God-given ministry?

In the Old Testament, God hinted at His plan for the Gentiles. As early as Abraham's call He declared that "all peoples on earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Isaiah looked ahead to the Messiah who would be "a light for the Gentiles" (Isaiah 42:6). Yet, God did not fully reveal His ultimate intentions until the first century.

I love how Paul described himself and the work God gave him. He saw himself as a "servant of the Gospel." He considered this call as God's grace working in his life and he recognized obeying it would be impossible without God's power.

Contemplate for a moment God's call on your life to service, ministry, and obedience. Have you submitted yourself to God's call? Do you lean on God's power working through you to obediently carry out His call?

Look back at verse 1. Where is Paul and why?

Although God chose to offer salvation to the Gentiles, many Jews violently resisted this "mystery." They believed the Jews were exclusively God's chosen people. Ironically, Paul was arrested in Jerusalem when a Jewish mob took advantage of a misunderstanding concerning Trophimus, Paul's Gentile-Christian companion from Ephesus. (You can read about it in Acts 21.)

Encouragement Needed

Approximately three to five years passed from the time of Paul's arrest to the writing of this letter. The believers in Ephesus knew Paul was imprisoned and why. Paul, assured he was in God's will, did not want them to be discouraged because of his sufferings.

Reread Ephesians 3:12-13. What glorious truth did Paul declare to encourage them in their faith?

The Greek word translated as “freedom” in the NIV in verse 12 refers to liberty of speech. Believers in Christ have the blessed privilege to boldly enter into God’s presence and talk freely and openly to our Savior!

How would this great privilege help the Ephesian believers?

Praying for Growth

Paul returns to prayer in verse 14. This prayer powerfully shows what God can accomplish - and desires to accomplish - in the lives of believers. Remember, God has *already* “blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.” These blessings are already available to us. Paul’s prayer “is concerned with the appropriation of God’s provision in Christ through the Spirit” (Expositor’s Bible Commentary, volume 11).

Read Ephesians 3:14-21 from the NLT below:

¹⁴ When I think of all this, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, ¹⁵ the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. ¹⁶ I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. ¹⁷ Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God’s love and keep you strong. ¹⁸ And may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. ¹⁹ May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God. ²⁰ Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. ²¹ Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen.

Make a list of Paul’s requests for the Ephesian believers.

Who enables these blessings to be active in their – and our - lives?

Our God, the Creator of heaven and earth, has all power and unlimited resources. He longs to pour His power and love into our lives through the presence of His Spirit. As we *continue* to trust in Him, our relationship with Him deepens and grows and we experience more of His blessings.

Paul's prayer moves to a doxology of praise in 3:20-21. Can't you feel the intensity of Paul's worship even in the written words. *Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine... God is able!*

Read Ephesians 3:20-21 out loud as a prayer of praise to God.

What life circumstance threatens to discourage you now? How can remembering your freedom to approach God encourage you?

What blessing of God do you need to experience the most today? Using Paul's prayer as a model, write your plea to God, knowing He is able!

Weekly Challenge

(Each week, in addition to the weekly lesson, I will provide an opportunity – for those who have the time and desire – to go a little deeper. If you are unable to do this, please don't worry, but if you can, take the plunge!)

Before next Wednesday, identify someone in your life that needs encouragement. Pray for them daily and send them a hand-written note of encouragement. I'd love to hear about any results!