

The Insanity of Obedience: Victorious Living

Romans 8:18; 35-39

November 19, 2017

What do you fear the most? When day comes to an end, and you lay your head on the pillow and turn off the light, what dark thought enters your mind?

It was about three years after the death of Jesus the Nazarene, but the conflict between the religious rulers and the followers of Jesus continued. A deacon by the name of Stephen is arrested and charged with blasphemy before the Sanhedrin and found guilty. He was dragged outside the city gates and stoned to death. Watching all of this and approving of it was a young man named Saul.

Killing Stephen set off a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem and Christians ran for their lives. It also seemed to catapult Saul into a leadership position and soon he is going house to house looking for Christians and dragging them off to jail. Not satisfied with that, he receives extradition papers from the ruling high priest and travels north to Damascus to arrest and bring them back to Jerusalem.

But something arrests him. A light from heaven flashed around him, blinding him and he fell to the ground and heard a voice say, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Years later, looking back on this event, in his letter to the Corinthians he writes, "*and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.*"

9 For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."

Saul is taken into the city where he meets a disciple named Ananias, who prays for the filling of the Holy Spirit, he receives his sight, and is baptized and welcomed into the Christian community in Damascus.

He is a changed man. Luke writes in Acts 9, *“At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?” ²²Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.*

Jesus has done a 180 on Saul. So much so that a few years later he does a name change from Saul to Paul. No preparation, no training, no seminary, no Bible Study, no membership class. He

just starts preaching. And almost immediately runs into opposition.

²³After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, ²⁴but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. ²⁵But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.”

From persecutor to persecuted. For the next three decades Paul would endure prison, beatings, and stoning. Five times he was flogged. Three times he was shipwrecked. I would be a little nervous about sailing again, if that happened to me three times, wouldn't you? He often went without sleep, without shelter, cold and hungry. Plus he carried the enormous pressure of caring for the churches he had helped start.

Seems insane. Who would want that job? But without his sacrifice, the gospel

might not ever have gotten out of Judea, or preached to the Gentiles. We would be missing about half of the New Testament. And it would be highly unlikely you would be sitting in church today.

Some two and a half decades after his conversion he would write a letter to the church in Rome. He has been laying out how to live a victorious life in the Spirit because of what God has done in Christ. Then he addresses the topic of suffering and writes these words, *“¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*

In other words, heaven is going to be so incredible that whatever sufferings we experienced here will seem trite. He concludes this marvelous chapter with these words of victory.

³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or

persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Life will test our courage

What had he learned during those years? He learned that life is hard, that it can be dangerous, and that it will test our courage. But he also learned that he had nothing to fear. That nothing would be able to separate him from the love of God.

Dmitri grew up in a small Russian village during the years of communism. The nearest church was a three day walk because most of the churches had been destroyed by the government. Concerned that his sons would grow up without knowing about Jesus, he and his wife began reading them Bible stories once a week. The boys actually enjoyed learning the stories and soon they were teaching them the hymns of their faith as well. It became family worship.

The neighbors noticed and asked if they could join them and soon they had 25 people meeting for worship. Then party officials noticed and threatened Dmitri. When attendance hit 50, they had him fired from his factory job, his wife lost her teaching position, and the boys were expelled from school.

When it hit 75, soldiers came to the meeting, roughed up Dmitri, and ordered them to stop. As they left a grandmother

yelled at the officer, "You have laid hands on a man of God and you will not survive." Two days later he died of a heart attack. The next church service, 150 people showed up.

So he was arrested and sent to prison for 17 years. He was locked up in a tiny cell and regularly tortured. But he would not renounce his faith. Each day he would rise at sunrise and face the east and sing a hymn of praise. All the prisoners would mock him and throw things at him to get him to shut up. But he wouldn't stop.

Then one day they came in and told him that his family was gone. It was his breaking point. He told the guards he would sign a confession if they would let him go.

That night Dmitri was in deep despair. As he sat in his cell he felt as though he could hear his family praying for him. Six hundred miles away, his family was doing just that. They had sensed through the

Holy Spirit the despair of their husband and father and had knelt down to pray for him.

The next morning when the guards came, he refused to sign the confession. “I know my wife is alive and well and my sons are with her.”

They dragged him from his cell to the courtyard where the executions were held. But before they reached the courtyard, all 1500 prisoners stood up in their cells, faced the east and sang Dmitri’s hymn of praise.

The guards instantly released their hold on him and stepped away in terror. “Who are you?”

“I am a son of the living God and Jesus is his name.”

They returned him to his cell and sometime later he was released and returned to his family. Dmitri’s story reminds us that we too can live a

victorious life in a setting of suffering and difficulties.

Fear can inhibit our response to the call of God

I think Paul is speaking to the issue of fear to the Roman church. Paul is reminding them that in the midst of suffering God is with them and nothing in heaven or earth can separate them from God’s love. He is not saying that nothing bad will ever happen. He knew by personal experience that bad things can and will happen. But it’s about who is in control. For Paul, God is in control. Fear is a result of the absence of control. In our quest for self-preservation and safety, we seek to control everything that we do.

Fear is a part of all of our lives. Fear is good, in the sense that it puts us on guard, and keeps us from doing things that ultimately could cause us harm.

But fear becomes controlling when we allow it to dictate our lives. When we run

our lives to avoid fear, we merely create the illusion of control, when in reality it is fear that has taken control of us.

That's what we don't want to happen; we don't want fear to be in control of our lives, because if fear controls us, what room does that leave for God, and for God's service in the world? Fear will rob us of our God-given dreams.

And then something like Vegas and Texas happens and we begin to realize that the world is not a safe place and that life is tenuous and there is nothing we can do about it. There is not enough law enforcement in the world to protect us from evil people who want to do us harm. We can arm ourselves, put a security system in our house, store food and water in a bunker, stop sending our children to school and still we have no guarantees.

The Bible has a different approach to our fear. It tells us that when we find

ourselves fearful, rather than try to take control, cower in fear, or focus on avoiding or eliminating our fear; instead we are to fear God and trust that God will never let anything get between us and his presence.

Most of the time, when we experience fear, it is due to that little voice inside of our heads telling us that something is challenging or threatening our comfort level or sense of security. Paul is writing to people who have allowed fear to keep them from living the Christian life. They have given into whatever voice, or spirit has told them that living for Christ could cause discomfort, rejection, or any other negative emotion. God gave us a spirit of bravery, power, and love. So instead of giving into the voices within us that try to frighten us, instead of allowing them to become the thing that drives us, we are reminded of Jesus' words, "*In the world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*"

What you fear, also says much about what you value. What do you fear? How do you cope with it? What might that say about what you value?

If we are fixated on overcoming fear, then how can we be in full submission to God's plan and purpose for our lives? In other words, what we fear really shows us where we trust God the least. Fear weighs us down, and can inhibit the work of the Spirit in us, and around us. We ultimately want to get rid of the fear that holds us back so that we can be ready and available for the purposes of God.

The Pilgrims

This Thursday many of us will join with friends and family to celebrate Thanksgiving. You know the story of how in September 1620, over 100 pilgrims set sail from England, looking for a fresh start and a place where they could freely worship God. On November 19, they sighted Cape Cod. They tried to make for

the Hudson River, but were turned back by tumultuous storms. They were many miles north of the Virginia colony and there was no way they could reach it due to the inclement weather. They finally came to rest in Provincetown Harbor where "they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of Heaven who brought them over the vast and furious ocean and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof." The voyage from Plymouth had taken 65 days.

They had no houses, no stored goods, and no knowledge of the country they faced. The season was winter, harsh and cruel. To their backs was the sea, an impenetrable barrier between them and home. They could not expect any help from England until after the *Mayflower* returned. Their captain was eager to leave and threatened to dump them all on shore and take off.

Several parties of men were organized over the next few weeks to survey the land and determine a site for the colony. Women and children stayed on board the *Mayflower* for another two months, unable to step onto the land they'd sailed so far to reach, not knowing if their husbands and fathers and brothers would return from these expeditions into the unknown.

The Pilgrims saw a few Native Americans here and there during the first four months in Plymouth, but in general the Native people kept their distance.

Then a virus swept through the group, devastating colonists and crew alike. No one knows what this illness was, though it may have been pneumonia. Regardless, it was devastating. Seven of the company of near 150 remained well enough to tend to the rest, fetching wood for fires,

making food, bathing and dressing the sick.

Of the original 102 *Mayflower* passengers, four died before reaching Plymouth. By the summer of 1621 there were another 46 deaths among the passengers, and about 25 deaths among the crew. Only 12 of 26 men with families and 4 of the 12 single men and boys survived. "All but a few" of the women survived. In order to hide the number of deaths from the Native Americans, the Pilgrims buried their dead in the night.

On March 16 a native named Samoset walked boldly into the company at work building houses and began speaking to them in English. Samoset had learned some English from fishermen and traders in the area.

In the next few days the colonists were visited by several representatives of the Native people in the area. Several days

later, Massasoit arrived with his brother, sixty warriors, and Squanto.

Squanto knew English and had lived in England for a while after being kidnapped and sold into slavery. Without Squanto's help and guidance, the Plymouth Colony would not have survived. The English considered him "a special instrument sent of God for their good beyond their expectation." He acted as interpreter between the colonists and Massasoit, taught the Pilgrims how to fish and plant corn, how to live in harmony with the land, "and never left them till he died" in 1654. The Pilgrims would have starved without his help.

The *Mayflower* returned to England in April. Not one of the colonists left to go back with it.

All through the summer the Colony began to rebound, finishing their small encampment, gathering food, and tending crops. The colonists regained their

strength and found the land provided them with plenty.

At summer's end, when harvest was in, Governor John Carver called for a special celebration. The colonists began to gather food for a traditional English "harvest home."

The Pilgrims invited Massasoit, who came with 90 of his people and whose hunters contributed five deer to the celebration. The Pilgrims gathered corn, wild turkey, ducks and other fowl, fish, and venison. The first Thanksgiving lasted about a week, with three days' straight of feasting. It was time was filled with prayers, dances, shooting matches, wrestling, and other games.

These Christians knew first hand victorious living in the midst of suffering and hardship.

Conclusion

Paul writes in verse 15, *“The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.”* Our status as sons and daughters means our heavenly parent is always with us.

The presence of fear is not a sign of weakness or lack of faith. I hope I have not given that impression. Such feelings are common to us all. It is a sign of strength however to overcome our fear. Courage and boldness are not so much the absence of fear as it is the control of fear through our confidence in God. Romans 8 promise us God-control.

What is the greatest fear you face right now? What would it mean to you to name that fear, to turn it over to God, and surrender your life to his control? How might our life be different if we were to turn our fear over to God?

Let's pray.

*Dear Father,
My heart and mind are flooded with fears.
Sometimes I am paralyzed, I feel unable to
go on.*

*These fears are overwhelming, they
remain with me day and night.*

Yet I hold onto your truth.

*You have told us not to fear, for you have
overcome the world.*

*So I cling to you, I trust in your promises,
that you will never fail me, never forsake
me.*

*In moments of such crippling fear,
I choose to hold your hand.*

*I know you have experienced the most
fearful places,*

I know that you have risen again.

*In you all promises meet and new life
begins.*

You are my Savior,

I hide in you,

Protected by your love,

*And sheltered by your grace.
My Father.*