

The Cross Before the Crown

2 Timothy 2:8-13

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on 7/24/2011

Introduction

- ❖ If you've never heard of Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, I want to introduce you to him this morning. He is a follower of Jesus Christ, and he has been sentenced to die. Youcef is a pastor of an evangelical underground church in Northern Iran. He was arrested after publicly challenging of a change in Iranian education policy that requires all students, including his children, to read from the Quran. He was initially charged with protesting, but charges were later changed to apostasy and evangelizing Muslims.
 - Last September he was found guilty and sentenced to die by hanging. The verdict was under appeal, but last week the Supreme Court of Iran upheld the decision. There was provision for annulment but on the condition that Pastor Youcef recant his faith.

- ❖ Now for a Christian living in the West, especially here in America, we hear stories like that and react in two ways. First, we're shocked! Shocked that stuff like this still goes on in the world. You can be executed for changing your beliefs? For wanting more freedom to direct your child's education?

- ❖ Second, we feel detached from Youcef's experience. It feels so foreign to us, so strange. Persecution like this is only found in books and articles. For some reason that God only knows, the American Church has been mercifully spared from such tribulation.
 - It is certainly not because we're better people or better Christians than, say, believers in Iran. We can't claim some special protection, as if God is looking out for American Christians more than other followers of Christ.
 - But it is clear God has shown us grace. He has preserved religious freedom in this country. We can change our beliefs or share them without fear of arrest.

- ❖ But as so often is the case, we end up taking God's grace for granted. We get so used to the freedom and relative ease of our Christian lives that when hardship and suffering actually show up, many of us are surprised. We feel as though something strange is happening to us. And more often than not, we can grow disillusioned with Christianity or bitter towards God.

- ❖ So this gift of freedom and comfort could become a curse, if it leads us to forget how central suffering is to the Christian life. In fact, Christianity was founded upon suffering. Do we forget that we are following a Savior who was mistreated as a common criminal and executed on a cross?
 - Do we forget what happened to his first followers? According to tradition, only four of the twelve disciples died of natural causes. If you don't count Judas who took his own life after betraying Christ, seven had their lives cut short by a brutal death. Four were crucified, one was stoned, one beheaded, and one speared.
 - And consider the Apostle Paul, who wrote this letter while in chains. According to tradition, his imprisonment ended with his execution.

- ❖ The Bible pulls no punches when it comes to warning Christians of suffering to come. It never describes the Christian life through rose-colored glasses. In fact, Jesus warned his followers saying, *“In the world you will have tribulation.”* (Jn. 16:33)
 - Scripture tells us to count it all joy *when*, not if, we face trials of many kinds (Jas. 1:2) and to not be surprised (1 Pet. 4:12). Paul even warns in chapter 3:12 that all who desire to live a godly life in Christ will be persecuted. Not ‘may be’ but ‘will be’.
- ❖ So there is a pattern set for us. There is a biblical principle established. It says the road to glory is marked with suffering. Or in other words, the cross comes before the crown.
 - Jesus came once to bear his cross, and he will come again to receive his crown. Paul had to bear his cross before he could receive the crown of righteousness he longed for (4:8). So if you plan to follow in their footsteps, then you have to be prepared to suffer hardship *for* the gospel before you receive the glories *of* the gospel.
- ❖ To be honest, Christians like Pastor Youcef are far better prepared because they don’t have the “luxury” of forgetting what the Bible teaches about the Christian life, that suffering precedes glory. Thankfully, Paul has written to remind us of this - of three things to prepare us for *when*, not if, we face suffering in the Christian life. Let’s consider them.

Remember Jesus’ Suffering on His Road to Glory

- ❖ Paul says that as you face suffering in the Christian life **1) Remember Jesus’ suffering on his road to glory.** Read v8 again. *“Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel.”*
- ❖ First off let’s remember the context of this letter. Look back at chapter one. Paul was writing to Timothy his disciple who was pastoring the church of Ephesus. And since there was persecution against the church and deserters leaving the church, Paul commands Timothy in v8 to *“not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God.”*
 - V13 he says to follow the pattern of sound words I taught you. V14, guard the good deposit (the gospel) entrusted to you. He then tells Timothy how to guard that deposit in chapter 2:2, by entrusting it to faithful men who will be able to teach it to others.
- ❖ And in vv4-6, Paul offers three metaphors to communicate one point, that guarding the good deposit is tough work. You’ll suffer for it, so suffer with the dedication of a good soldier, the devotion of a professional athlete, and the diligence of a hard-working farmer.
 - And now Paul’s appeal to Timothy to share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ is undergirded by pointing to Christ himself. Remember Jesus!
- ❖ *What are we to remember about Jesus?* There are three things. **a) Remember Jesus is the Christ.** We have to remember that Christ is not his last name. It was an honorific title. It’s the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah, which means ‘the anointed one’.

- Remember, by Jesus' day, it had been over 400 years since Israel had a king on the throne. During those years of exile and foreign occupation, the prophets spoke of a Messiah, an anointed king that God would raise up to reclaim the throne of Israel and re-establish the kingdom. And the expectation was that this Messiah would come from the line of Israel's greatest king, David.
- ❖ **b) That explains why Paul describes Jesus as 'the offspring of David'.** It was believed that a son of David would one day fulfill God's words when he promised David in 2 Samuel 7:16, "*Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.*"
 - But all of David's sons failed as kings, and since the nation's exile, David's throne has been empty. So in Jesus' day, people were still waiting to see if God would fulfill his promise to David.
 - So for early Christians to call Jesus the Christ, the offspring of David, was significant. Paul is saying that Jesus is the Son of Promise, who will reign forever as King. But before Jesus could enter his glory and sit on his rightful throne, he must first suffer.
- ❖ **c) That is communicated in the description 'risen from the dead'.** Implicit in that phrase is Jesus' death. So the Messiah not only had to suffer, he had to die. That is what the religious leaders in Jesus' day couldn't wrap their heads around. No one questioned the Messiah would receive a crown. They just could not fathom the idea of their Messiah on a cross. But 'cross then crown' was Jesus' mission.
 - Was he ever tempted to just bypass the cross and head straight for the crown? Sure he was. That's what went on in those 40 days in the wilderness. The devil's temptation was to avoid any suffering and take your crown right now.
 - But Jesus did not succumb to the temptation. He knew what it would take to receive his crown. He explained to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus that the Christ had to suffer and then enter his glory (Lk. 24:26)
- ❖ And so Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame, for the joy set before him. (Heb. 12:2) *And what was that joy?* It was joy at the prospect of rescuing a people for God. For the longest time, when I would talk about what Jesus did for us on the cross, I used to always say he rescued us from sin and death. But the more I thought about it, Jesus doesn't rescue us from death BUT from staying dead.
 - The fact is, everybody dies. But because Jesus did not stay dead, all who hope in him have the hope of sharing in his resurrection. We will not stay dead but rise to live forever with God in his kingdom, under the good reign of his Christ, who has received his crown.
- ❖ So all three descriptions are meant to jog Timothy's memory. In case he is ever tempted to shrink back and avoid suffering as he goes about the work of the gospel, Timothy is to remember Jesus and his road to glory. Remember that even Jesus had to go through suffering.

- So as a follower of Jesus, we will have to walk the same road. There is no reason to assume you're exempt from this principle. The cross comes before the crown.
- ❖ But thankfully Jesus is more than just an example to follow, he is actually the source of hope that enables us to endure through hardship. Suffering is only bearable if you are hopeful that something better awaits you on the other side of it.
 - If I embrace a worldview that says there is nothing awaiting me after death, nothing but non-existence, if I believe this natural world is all there is, that there is no supernatural realm where my spirit continues but that after death I simply cease to exist, then how hopeless, how depressing it would be to go through suffering in this life! I might as well throw in the towel. In fact I could find relief in taking my own life. Nothingness is far better than suffering!
- ❖ Friends, this is why Jesus' resurrection makes all the difference! Only the hope of sharing in his resurrection gives you a real reason to endure even the worst suffering in this life.
 - If you do not share in this hope, I invite you to consider Jesus and his promise of rescue. Ask him to rescue you, and you can be sure that after you die, you will rise. You will rise with Christ.

Remember Paul's Suffering for the Sake of God's Chosen

- ❖ So Timothy is to remember Jesus Christ. Second, when he faces suffering he is to **2) Remember Paul's suffering for the sake of God's chosen.** Let's read v9. *"For which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound."*
 - So because of the gospel he preaches, Paul is suffering. He is sitting in a Roman dungeon, most likely charged with insurrection. If the gospel you preach tells people to trust and obey another crowned king other than Caesar, then you can be sure Rome will take notice. And they won't be pleased. So here Paul is bound with chains as criminal.
- ❖ But no matter his circumstances, Paul sees hope. Notice his play on words. I am bound but God's word is not bound! You can chain me but you can't chain the gospel. And this is not just a contrast Paul is making. There is a relationship of causality between his suffering and the gospel's advancement. Paul is bound *so that* the gospel may advance.
 - In other words, his suffering serves a purpose. We see this in the book of Philippians, which Paul wrote during another imprisonment. He explains how his chains served to advance the gospel by giving him the opportunity to preach Christ to all his guards (Phil. 1:12-13).
- ❖ So by recognizing that his suffering has a purpose, Paul could then go on in v10 and say, *"Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory."*

- Therefore (because the word of God is not bound but actually advanced by his suffering), Paul is willing to endure everything, even imprisonment, even death, for the sake of the elect, namely for their salvation.
- ❖ Now this idea of the elect, of God's chosen people, is prevalent throughout scripture, including many letters of Paul. In Ephesians 1:4, Paul teaches that God has chosen a people for salvation in Christ from before the foundation of the world. The timing implies his choosing is not on the basis of our worth, our goodness, our good deeds since the world had yet to be made.
 - Instead it is on the basis of his own loving, merciful nature and sovereign will. That means he actually chooses us in spite of the fact that we are unworthy, wicked and full of wicked deeds.
- ❖ Now some people object to this idea of God having an elect people. They're concerned that such an idea might demotivate Christians to suffer for the sake of the gospel. It might dry up missions and evangelism. Why take the risks? Why endure the ridicule, the shame, the persecution? If God has a chosen people, they'll be saved with or without my help.
 - But do you see how that kind of thinking never even crossed Paul's mind? For Paul, the doctrine of election was not a de-motivator for preaching the gospel. It was the very truth sustaining his efforts even in the face of suffering.
 - Because he believed God has a chosen people out there, Paul was willing to sacrifice body, time, comfort, even his own life to be a means by which God can bring the gospel of salvation to his elect - those who *will* accept God's invitation once they hear it.
- ❖ There was this one instance in Paul's missionary journeys, when he came to the city of Corinth for the first time. It's found in Acts chapter 18. He starts preaching the gospel to this pagan city, and immediately some are very receptive, while other are very hostile. Well one night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, "*Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.*" (18:9-10).
 - In other words, don't be scared, Paul. Keep preaching the gospel knowing that I have many of my people in this city. Now obviously when the Lord says 'my people' he is not referring to Christians already living in Corinth. Paul just arrived with the gospel.
 - "*I have many in this city who are my people*" implies there is an elect people in this city who have yet to be saved, lost sheep who have yet to be found.
- ❖ *Now how does Paul respond to that?* Does he say, "That's great news! Okay since your elect will be saved with or without me, I'm out of here. It was getting too dicey anyways." No, the scripture says, "*And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.*"

- So upon learning that God has an elect, Paul was actually motivated to continue preaching, knowing he would see conversions because God's purposes never fail. The doctrine of election actually motivated him to endure, for a year and a half, all the suffering that accompanies the gospel.
- ❖ Friends, the point I want you to see is that suffering in the Christian life always serves a purpose. Suffering is never just suffering. Timothy is to remember, as he is staring down hardship and tribulation, that Paul's suffering served to advance the gospel and led to the salvation of many.
 - In the same way, your suffering, your hardship serves a divine purpose. But often we doubt that. We wonder if there is any reason, any good in our suffering. Many times we imagine God as ambulance driver showing up in our lives after tragedy or disaster strikes. There is no ultimate purpose, no divine plan behind our suffering. It just happened. But now God will try to bring comfort and healing. He'll try to salvage any good out of a sad and unfortunate situation.
 - But the Bible describes God has far more active and involved in our suffering than what you would expect in an ambulance driver. God is more like a surgeon who has to make careful cuts and incisions into our lives (which hurt), but he does so out of love, for our good, and for a very good reason.
- ❖ Friends, could it be that the suffering you are being asked to endure is God-sent and meant to accomplish a divine purpose? Could it be that your hardship and suffering is affording you an opportunity to advance the word of God?
 - To tell your unbelieving friends and family about how merciful God is, how strong he is, how all-sufficient and satisfying he is for you -- even in the very midst of your terrible suffering. Perhaps you are called to endure for the sake of the elect. Like in Corinth, God has many in this city who are his people, people who have yet to be found. Perhaps that is the reason why you to suffer.

Remember the Need for Endurance in the Christian Life

- ❖ So remember Jesus' suffering on the road to glory. Remember Paul's suffering for the sake of God's chosen. And lastly, as you experience suffering **3) Remember the need for endurance in the Christian life.** Let's read vv11-13, "*The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful -- for he cannot deny himself.*"
 - These verses probably came from an early Christian hymn that Paul was familiar with. The line he's highlighting is in v12, "*If we endure, we will also reign with him.*" That connects the hymn to his main point. Endure suffering, bear your cross, and you will receive your crown. You will reign with Christ in his kingdom.

- ❖ Now one way to read v11 is as a reference to our death in relation to sin. But contextually that wouldn't fit Paul's point. I think it is best to see the death in relation to self and safety. "*If we have died with him*" is another way of saying if we have identified with Jesus by suffering with him, for him.
 - Paul speaks this way elsewhere. In 1 Corinthians 15:31 he said, "*I die everyday!*" He is referring to the daily death and suffering that all Christians are called to endure. In 2 Corinthians 4:10 he says he is "*always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.*"
 - That parallels v11. Paul endures daily death in his body for Jesus' sake, so that Jesus' resurrection life may also be manifested in his body.

- ❖ So after emphasizing our daily death with Christ and the necessity to endure in the Christian life, the second half of v12 issues a needed warning. "*If we deny him, he also will deny us.*"
 - Now in the New Testament, denying Christ can manifest in various ways. You could deny his name (Rev. 3:8), deny the gospel, deny truth about him OR the denial of Christ could manifest itself through our actions. In Titus 1:16, Paul talks about those who profess to know God but deny him by their works.

- ❖ So maybe you'll never blaspheme Jesus, maybe you'll never deny his name. But if you shrink back in the face of suffering, if you walk away from Jesus because walking the road he walked is just too hard and painful, then you have, in a sense, denied him.
 - Jesus said himself, "*whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.*" (Mt. 10:33) That is a scary thought, to be denied by Jesus, to hear him say, "*I never knew you.*" (Mt. 7:23)

- ❖ Now depending on how you interpret v13, that will determine if this hymn ends with another warning OR with a word of encouragement. "*If we are faithless, he remains faithful -- for he cannot deny himself.*"
 - Some commentators read *faithless* as equivalent to denying him, so naturally they would read "*he remains faithful*" as equivalent to "*he also will deny us*". In that case, the last line is reiterating that God remains faithful to his threats. If he did not deny those who are faithless, who deny him, he would be denying himself!

- ❖ But other commentators think the word *faithless* in v13 is not as strong as *deny* and should be read more like "*if we fail to live up to our profession*". If we fail to live up to our profession of faith, if we are faithless, if we waiver and doubt, God still remains faithful to us. To abandon or deny his children would be to deny himself!
 - I think in the end, both interpretations are valid because both points can be supported by scripture. The Bible says God is unchanging. He is consistent to carry out both this threats and promises. That's who he is faithful.

- ❖ But contextually, I think Paul intended v13 to be an encouragement to believers who are suffering by assuring them that the Lord is faithful to not only protect us, to keep us, from hardship, if he so wills. But more so, he is faithful to preserve us as we go through it.
 - It is very similar to what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10:13. He promised, “*No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.*”

Conclusion

- ❖ Friends, if any of you are tempted to give up on God, to give up on faith, to bypass your cross and head straight for the crown -- because the suffering you face is just too hard, too daunting, too much -- remember “*no temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man.*” That includes Jesus. He knows exactly what that particular temptation feels like.
 - He faced greater hardship than we can imagine YET he did not succumb to the temptation to avoid suffering. He knew the cross comes first. Suffering precedes glory. And as his followers, we are called to walk the same road, the road marked with suffering.
 - Yet we do so knowing our God is faithful. Faithful to not let our suffering grow beyond our ability to endure. Faithful to provide a way out, a way to endure. Even if we feel faithless, hopeless, helpless, he remains faithful - for he cannot deny himself.