

Suffering Faithfully

You know those warning deals on the radio they do? They come on while you are relaxing in your car listening to music—“For the next 60 seconds we will be testing the national emergency warning system—EEEEEEEEEEEE”. It is the most annoying obnoxious noise ever. I have learned to immediately switch stations.

Wouldn't it be great if God would do that? He should come to you in a dream or a vision or send an angel to say, “For the next two years God will be testing you with suffering and pain, at the end of two years you can go back to a good life.” Wouldn't that be great? But no, that's not how it works. Just check all the biblical characters from first to last. In Genesis, Joseph, without warning, gets beat up by his brothers, thrown in a well, sold into slavery in Egypt, lied about, falsely accused, and thrown in a dungeon. He had to be thinking, “When will this end? How much can I take? What is God doing?” You and I know the rest of the story—God was preparing Joseph to save Israel, to bring his brothers to Egypt so that 400 years later, God could lead them out and give them the land and make them a great nation and reveal Himself to the whole world through Abraham's promised descendant Jesus. God had a better plan.

The stories throughout the Bible consistently reveal that God knows what He is doing, God always has a better plan. Consider Daniel—one day he is a bright wealthy Prince of Jerusalem with considerable potential, free to make an impact on the promising future ahead of him. The next day the Babylonian army shows up at the gate and takes Daniel as a hostage back to Babylon to be reeducated and serve as a slave to the Chaldean king. After a lifetime of service which included considerable threats, intimidation, danger, and harassment; it is clear that Daniel's service in Babylon was a key reason that King Cyrus would allow the Jews to return and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. Without that, what city would the Messiah enter? What Temple would Jesus have taught in and debated the Pharisees? Where would Jesus have been crucified for our sins?

Especially True in the End Times

Even in the very end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation which foretells the events of the end times, we see faithful followers of Christ who are being arrested, tortured, and killed; yet the Bible says they persevere, they overcome, and they emerge victorious (Rev. 14:12-13). Normally, we don't consider imprisonment and death a great victory or a great success story, but in Rev. 15:2 the very same people are seen in heaven and it says they were “victorious”. In fact, they are full of joy and sing a great song of praise and worship to the Lord. There is also a revealing contrast in these passages about the suffering of these saints. The people

who imprisoned them and killed them were for a short time doing quite well materially and influentially, but their eternal destiny is not so good. In Rev. 14:10 they “will drink of the wine of the wrath of God in the cup of His anger; and be tormented with fire forever.”

Honor Roll of the Faithful

There is a very revealing passage in Hebrews 11 that most people skip over. Everybody that is a student of the Bible reveres Hebrews 11 as God’s hall of fame of the people of faith. Each on this list has believed God’s Word and responded in faith. Because of their faith they were rewarded with great victories, miracles, and blessings; but then there is a pivot to another group in verse 35. This anonymous group is called simply “others”. You can tell that the vast majority of believers throughout history fall into this category of “others”. We know that Elijah had faith, but we find out in 1 Kings 19 that there are 7000 other faithful people who risked their lives and suffered during the reign of Ahab and Jezebel. The author of Hebrews says these others were tortured, mocked, scourged, imprisoned, and killed. “Others” were poorly clothed, destitute, afflicted, and ill treated. Hebrews says all these others gained approval from God through their faith, and the world was not worthy of them. You maybe thinking, “Yeah, I bet God gave them some good stuff or did miracles for them too”. Wrong, stuff and miracles are not the issue for the vast majority of the faithful. Like Abraham, these others were not obedient for the stuff, but he was looking for “the city whose architect and builder is God (Heb. 11:10), and he desired “a heavenly country” (v16).

The Riddle of Hebrews 11:39-40

The author of Hebrews said these faithful others “did not receive what was promised” during their lifetime. What does he mean? What were they promised ultimately? He is talking about the big picture, the big promise. We tend to think small. We think of the little miracles like Abraham having a son so late in life, or the walls of Jericho tumbling down, or Daniel surviving the lion’s den. The big miracle that he is speaking of in Heb. 11:40 as “something better” is the redemption of mankind made possible by the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Whether it be Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, or “the others” which includes all of us who have the faith, we shall all be “made perfect”. Because of Jesus’ atoning work on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, we shall all “receive what was promised” by faith.

The Willingness to Accept the Worst the World Has to Offer

We are willing to accept the worst because of our faith in the BEST GOD HAS TO OFFER WHICH WILL BE REALIZED IN THE RESURRECTION. Consider the example of Jeremiah and Isaiah. Jeremiah was scourged, humiliated, and imprisoned. Isaiah was sawn in two. As Hebrews says, “the world was not worthy of these men”. The world will be judged and

destroyed, but these men will be resurrected and rewarded. Their faith was not immediate fulfillment but in the ultimate fulfillment of the resurrection. They looked forward to Christ. Therefore, don't expect that emergency warning signal of coming trouble, but when it comes, live by faith in "what is promised".