

Throughout the World

1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

For the most of us, we will never suffer; truly suffer, because of our faith in Jesus Christ. Except for rare and isolated examples, those of us in the United States are allowed to practice religion without oppression. This freedom is written into the very document around which our country was founded and from which it still governs itself. This is not the case for people in every country around the world. Gordon McClellan tells the story of his friend Benyamin Yusuf who experienced brutal persecution for his choice of religion. He was raised in Nigeria, Africa by a strict Muslim family. When he decided to become Christian, his father disowned him and banished him from their home. Benyamin decided to leave his native land for a more tolerant society. His feet being his only means of transportation, he began walking to the border. Along the way, he was captured and put in prison. The prison guards spent every night for several months trying to beat a renunciation out of him. Benyamin never renounced his faith. Instead, he would forgive the guards at the conclusion of every beating.

One of the jailers became intrigued by Benyamin, who offered such love in the face of such cruelty. One night, after a particularly vicious beating, the jailer came to the cell to ask Benyamin why he forgave him and the other guards after every beating. Benyamin told the guard about Jesus and the lessons of selfless love and forgiveness he taught. The guard left in disbelief, but returned much later that night with the surprise announcement that he had come to help Benyamin escape. Escape he did, eventually making his way to the United States, where he earned a PhD in religious studies before returning to Nigeria, Africa to plant churches.

This story reminds us that people suffer for their faith, even in our modern world. So we must ask whether this text is pertinent to the majority of us who have not suffered for our faith. Is this text speaking only to those who have been oppressed, beaten, or expelled for their faith? If the answer to this question is yes, then we would have little need to study the text further. However, if the answer is no we must continue. This text is not addressed only to those who have literally suffered for their faith. This text is speaking to all Christians.

Whether referring to persecution or to the more common distresses and frustrations we all feel every day, the point is that as Christians we are not flying solo, as Herb Smith would have reminded us. There is a great deal of people on the ground helping us to fly. The Christian faith is not individualistic. It is not just about my personal relationship with Jesus Christ. This is important, for sure, but at its core, Christianity invites us to become part of one body of Christ, which is larger than the troubles, successes, or frustrations of any one of us. Too often, faith is focused on my personal relationship with Jesus and little else. This text, and 5:9 in particular, reminds us that as Christians we are a part of the whole. Others through the ages have pressed the importance of this lesson. John Donne wrote in his "Meditation XVII" that "no man (person) is an island entire of itself; every man (person) is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." Martin Luther King quoted Donne in his sermon at the Temple Israel in Hollywood on February 26, 1965, to remind all that we do not exist merely for our own needs.

This awareness is essential to our ability to relate to others and the needs they have or particular troubles they face. The ability to empathize, to achieve solidarity, and to find common ground ultimately comes from our understanding that each of us is part of a larger whole. If we; you and I; misunderstand this we will be less able to engage the world in Christ like love, the very essence of which

is to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. This can be successful only if we understand our own existence to be intricately tied to and part of the existence of our neighbor.

The evil one wants you and me to forget or abandon this notion of our "connectionality", of being united with all Christians around the world in our struggles, triumphs, joys, and fears. So to forget would be to sever the most important tie that binds people of faith together in the commitment to love one another as Christ loved. **Gordon McClellan**

When I was in Georgia the other week there was the speaker at the Warrior Integration Symposium. He is Col. (Retired) Leo Thorsness, an air force officer who was a Vietnam prisoner of war for 6 years. He was held in Hanoi Hilton Prisoner of War Camp where the integrators were known to be extremely brutal and successful at getting what they wanted to know. He told of how he was strengthened by his fellow prisoners by just knowing that they were going through the same experiences and that they were praying for him.

The Nigerian school girls who were kidnapped last month are also being persecuted because of their Christian faith and desire for an education. Some have renounced their faith, but what would I or you have done in their place?

In the news just in these last two week we learned of a Sudanese woman (a Christian sister) sentenced to death for refusing to renounce her Christian faith and is unlikely to change her mind despite giving birth in prison, her husband says. Meriam Yehya Ibrahim was condemned to die by hanging after she declined to profess she is a Muslim, the religion of her father. Sharia law considers her a Muslim and does not recognize her marriage to a Christian. The court convicted her of apostasy and adultery two weeks ago. At the time, she was eight months' pregnant. She gave birth to a baby girl last week at a Khartoum prison, where she's

detained with Martin, her 20-month-old son. Despite languishing in prison with two infants, she's holding firm to her beliefs, according to her husband, Daniel Wani, who is a Christian. "There is pressure on her from Muslim religious leaders that she should return to the faith," Wani told CNN in a TV exclusive. "She said, 'How can I return when I never was a Muslim? Yes, my father was a Muslim, but I was brought up by my mother.' "

According to Peter; in the face of danger, the faithful (you and I) are to cling in hope to God's promised good. We are to do this in three ways. First, we are to act humbly, acknowledging the power and providence of God. Second, we are to act watchfully, disciplined enough not to doze off in the face of impending danger. Third, we are to act faithfully, by resisting the evil one and those who follow in his entourage.

The primary comfort that the epistle provides for those who suffer is the comfort of God's present grace and eventual triumph. There is also a secondary comfort. The *koinonia* that we believers share with Christ is echoed in the *koinonia* we share with our fellow Christians, who also suffer. First Peter calls upon us, if we are to be the faithful to "resist," by reminding us that we are part of a resistance movement that extends far beyond our own communities and reaches all the world (5:9). The promise of God's triumph over the forces of evil moves from mere talk to thankful living in all things: "To him be the power forever and ever. Amen"

(5:11). **David L. Bartlett**

Christ has connected us and what happens to one is the business and concern of the other. Trust in God and do what you can to relieve the suffer of others throughout the world.