

7-19-09 sermon Slipping Through the Hands of Death (2 Corinthians 11:16-33)

Pastor Jim Beckwith, Annville Church of the Brethren, Annville, PA

When the Apostle Paul gives reason why the Christians of Corinth should trust *his* teaching instead of other teachings of “*false apostles*” – he lists (starting in vs. 23) all the terrible things he has gone through in order to get the Good News proclaimed. He has gone through *more* than those “*false apostles*” have experienced –

- he has been in prison more frequently;
- he has been flogged more severely;
- he has been exposed to death again and again!

Let’s stop right there for a bit. ***That*** is a trademark of being a true witness for Jesus? ... to be “*exposed to death again and again*”?!? How many of *us* meet that test for faithful witnessing? Does it make us think differently about people who have been put in prison in our day because of standing up for what they believe?

Some of you know I took part in a witness against a gun dealer in Philadelphia last January – a gun dealer who refuses to quit selling to people who are known to sell to criminals [by contrast to other gun shops in the city]. A significant number of crimes in PA and NJ can be traced to guns sold by *this* gun shop. Some from our peace conference held a non-violent witness at the gun shop that landed them in prison. It made the newspaper. I wasn’t so sure about the going to prison bit, even though all charges were dropped a few months later. But now I have heard that the gun dealer – who still refuses to change his ways – *may* close his business as a result of the publicity. Some evils may end when people with strong convictions risk prison.

Paul was punished with imprisonment. But that’s not all. Eight times he was flogged – five times at the hands of Jewish authorities and three times at the hands of Roman authorities, who used rods, despite the fact that as a Roman citizen, he should have been protected by law from such punishment.

- His enemies also tried to stone him to death.
- Three times he was shipwrecked, and he spent 24 hours in the open sea.
- In his constant travels, he was in danger from rivers, bandits, from foreigners, from his own people; he faced city dangers, country dangers, and danger from “*false brothers*.” (which is the whole point of Paul’s writing this chapter)
- even Paul’s work was hard on him – he often went without sleep, without food, without clothing, and he carried daily pressure in his concern for the churches.

If he must boast about something that should make the Corinthians believe him to be a true and trustworthy teacher, Paul says he will boast about his many weaknesses and trials – which show God’s protective hand upon him. Only by God’s grace has he been brought through such trials to be a witness to the Gentiles.

- Why, he even slipped through the hands of the governor of Damascus when orders had been given for his arrest – he got away by being lowered in a basket from a window in the wall of the city.

Have **you** experienced such a dramatic escape from the hands of death?

Our spiritual ancestors did. The *Martyr’s Mirror* was read almost as regularly as the Bible in daily meditations, as early Brethren reflected on how those faithful to the Way of Jesus had deliberately chosen to be baptized as adults instead of as babies, deliberately chosen to not take up arms to take part in the violence of this world, deliberately chosen to refuse to take an oath of loyalty to a worldly government ... in order to be faithful to Jesus, even when they knew that this would bring punishment, and often death. The full title of that book which our spiritual ancestors read is:

The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians who baptized only upon confession of faith, and who suffered and died for the testimony of Jesus, their Saviour, from the time of Christ to the year A.D. 1660. (a long title!)

As a 16-year-old, I stood at the site in Switzerland where early Anabaptists were held under water until they drowned as a punishment for being baptized as an adult into a fellowship outside the official state church. Now *that* was formative for me, as I wondered ... could *I* be true to the faith of our spiritual ancestors? Truly our faith is a faith of the martyrs, a holy faith!

Too easily we lose sight of the call of Jesus to take up our cross and follow him. Too readily we want to have Jesus himself be the sacrifice, the *only* sacrifice ... instead of giving our loyalty to Jesus, the once-and-for-all sacrifice who nevertheless calls us to follow in his steps and become living sacrifices of faithfulness ourselves.

I confess: the cheap grace of our culture’s watered-down Christianity is attractive – it is so much easier to go ahead and do whatever we want to do, believing that we can then just ask Jesus to pardon us and go on ... instead of forcing ourselves to truly turn away from evil, to actually stop doing the things we know we will have to ask forgiveness for, and find ways to confront those evils and effectively oppose them.

Paul knew that God calls us to serious business – turning the world upside down, putting a stop to the lusts and luxuries, the vanity and violence, the power-plays and pride of sin! He knew that people don't like to have their dark sides exposed.

This is *dangerous* business, this Way of Jesus that *confronts* and *renounces* evil-doing. And it must be pursued in humility, fully aware of our own vulnerability. In the next chapter (2 Cor. 12), Paul talks about a thorn in his own flesh that tormented him, reminding him that we are weak, but the Lord is strong. We must accept our vulnerable frailty, in order for the Lord to show his powerful strength. Jesus himself took on the frailty of our human form, humbling himself to death on a cross, so that the power of God might be revealed ... the Life-giving power of God, able to resurrect God's faithful servants beyond the domain of sin and death, so that we might *slip through the hands of death* and be made alive to God forever! Hallelujah!

The Bible is full of stories of weak, frail, little people who managed amazing feats because they chose to stand firm, believing in the power of the Lord our God. Consider little shepherd boy David refusing to cower before Goliath, using a simple slingshot against tremendous armor and strength. Consider the small company of 100 soldiers that Gideon was permitted to take in Judges ch. 7 to fight against the vast hosts of Midianites and Amalekites, who were as *"thick as locusts"* with camels that *"could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore"* – all so that it would be obvious to everyone that Gideon's 100 soldiers had *not* saved themselves by their own strength. It was only by the power and grace of God that they were saved from their enemies. Indeed, the Lord seems to delight in helping frail and frightened, but faithful people *slip through the hands of death* to reveal God's Life-giving power!

What are *you* up against? What evils threaten to take life's blessings away from you, from those you love, from the people God is asking *you* to take care of?

Will *you* rise up in the power of faith and let God use *you* ... to speak out and to act against evil ... to earnestly seek God's justice and mercy for all the people of this creation ... exposing selfishness and sinful pride for what it is?

It is difficult. The issues that confront us are many. To name just a couple:
(1) religious leaders, including our CoB General Secretary have issued a call to work for justice in health care reform – that same call was emailed to a host of pastors by

the editors of *Sojourners* magazine – a journal for evangelicals concerned about social justice. With so many people losing their jobs and so many employers finding it nearly impossible to provide benefits for their workers, a whole lot of prayers and the inspired creativity of people of faith are desperately needed.

(2) A recently written history of CPS (Civilian Public Service) documents young men who were assigned to mental health institutions because their Christian convictions led them to seek alternative service instead of going to war. Those same Christian convictions then led them to make public “*the abuse and poor services endured by patients,*” which eventually started “*a reform movement to improve conditions in mental institutions.*” Willingness to live out Christian convictions brought forth ministries like Philhaven ... because some Christians risked standing overagainst the ways of the world, even taking positions different from those of other Christians.

Consider the risks that the Apostle Paul took – standing up against the pressures of other Christian leaders, so that he could declare the true Gospel: that Gentiles do *not* have to take on Jewish ways in order to be God’s people. That’s the main reason Paul was in such danger. He was perceived as being sympathetic to the enemy culture around them. He believed that God calls us to make peace between the people of our own culture and the people of other cultures – allowing God to redeem absolutely anyone who repents of sin and seeks to live a new life in Christ.

What risks are *you* willing to take to reconcile enemies, to welcome strangers, to forgive the worst offenders who truly believe ...? Are you willing to make this Good News fully available to the worst offenders, strangers, and enemies in our world? with a heartfelt prayer that they become our brothers and sisters in Christ’s grace?

Be true to God’s Truth, as God makes you able, and you will live strong in the faith that made our spiritual ancestors strong. And more than that, you will become a spiritual forebearer of generations to come. Your children, your grandchildren, your friends, your neighbors need desperately to see *your* example of godly convictions:

So ... say NO to all evils. Overcome evil with good. Stand up against injustices; help all the people of God’s creation to be redeemed, even when the world punishes you for doing what God wants. Embrace God’s redeeming grace for your own life. *Slip through the hands of death* – and live forever by the power of the Risen Lord!
Amen. [Hymn: *Faith of the Martyrs* #413]