

Reflection - Patiently Endure With Joy

by Larry Totzke

Our nation is in an extremely precarious position right now. Our leaders are faced with very difficult decisions which will lead to life-changing outcomes that, in too many cases, mean life or death. How do they balance the need to stem the tide of COVID-19 with the need to “reopen” America and get the economy back up and running? Life and death hang in the balance on both sides. If they don’t control the virus, thousands upon thousands more will die, mostly, but not exclusively, elderly and the marginalized. If they don’t get the economy back up and running soon, millions will be profoundly affected, many for the long term and thousands may die of all sorts of causes. I feel helpless; I have no solution to propose.

While our leaders go through the painstaking process of making these crucial decisions, the rest of our lives hang in the balance, some much more precariously than others. We can only abide by the decisions that are reached and pray that they have the least negative impact on the most people. Sometimes in people’s lives this is what it comes down to. How can we endure when there is so much on the line?

The people in the church in the city of Colossae in what is now Turkey around 60 A.D. did not face the same kind of dilemma as we do in America today. They were not faced with a pandemic nor an economic crisis, but they were facing a spiritual crisis which could have eternal implications. The church had been established several years before by a Colossian named Epaphras who became a believer while the Apostle Paul was ministering in the church in the neighboring city of Ephesus. It was a congregation who had placed their faith in Jesus and had demonstrated their faith by their love for others and by the hope they had for life everlasting in heaven. But they were a church dealing with internal conflict. Some were trying to introduce teaching that was contradictory to the supremacy of Christ over all demonic forces. So the Apostle Paul wrote them a letter to encourage them to hold fast to the one way of salvation through Christ.

After his usual greeting, Paul begins his letter by telling the Colossians how he prays for them. He writes from a heart of compassion. He had suffered much, and he was still suffering. He wanted to encourage them in the best way that he knew, that was to encourage them that Christ is sufficient in all circumstances. His prayer contains both an appeal to God and some exhortation for the church.

It's in his prayer that I find application for the disparate situations faced by Americans today and the Colossians of 2,000 years ago. Colossians 1:9-14 is the passage to which I am referring:

9 And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; 11 being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. 13 He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (ESV)

Paul prays that they would know God's will for them so that they would live according to it and reap spiritual fruit (verses 9 and 10). Then he prays that God's power would strengthen them so that they could endure their internal conflicts with patience and even joy (verse 11). Then he gives thanks to God that those who believe have been redeemed from the power of Satan and have been promised eternity with Jesus, their redeemer (verses 12-14).

Endurance with patience and even joy is the outcome that both the Colossians and we, in our situation today, have in common. There is not much that we, individually can do about our current situation but to endure it. I think Paul's prayer shows us two things that are essential for endurance. One is that, in order to endure, there has to be the opportunity for a successful, worthwhile outcome. The other is that we have to have sufficient stamina in order to outlast and overpower our enemy. And we also must be patient in order to preserve our stamina and not burn out before the conflict is over. Then there will be joy in the end.

In the case of the Colossian church, they were in a conflict that they could win if they understood that Jesus is the all-sufficient defeater of any demonic force. They needed to endure the false teachers who were trying to convince them otherwise and to trust Jesus to prove himself over time. They did have an outcome worthy of their endurance. They had already been redeemed from the power of Satan and had the promise of eternity in heaven.

In our case, we, as individuals, do not have the ability to defeat COVID-19 and get our economy going again. In fact, for many, those goals might not even be possible. While the “We’re all in this together” theme sounds good, it is not true for many. Some of us are “in this” with many more resources than others and in much better physical condition to overcome the virus than others. Yet we do ALL have the same worthy outcome to look forward to as the Colossians did, if we are willing to embrace it, and we do all have the same source of power to outlast the enemy as the Colossians did, again, if we are willing to embrace it.

I didn’t live through two world wars, slavery, the holocaust, or any other plague or conflict that has ravaged the citizens of the world, but I have read, seen, and heard enough to know that the power that comes from above and the hope of an eternity in heaven are sufficient to enable us to endure whatever conflict may come our way, and to do it with patience and the joy that can only come with the assurance of a certain victory. As Paul prayed for the Colossians, so do I pray for all who are enduring during this difficult time. May you reflect on the all sufficiency of the Lord, Jesus Christ to give you the strength to endure and the hope of an outcome that is worth the effort. And may you find peace in the process.

In the words of the old hymn, “*My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.*” Do you believe that Jesus is all sufficient to enable you to overcome any conflict? In the next passage in Colossians Paul describes Jesus in a way that should leave no doubts. That will be the topic of my next Reflection.