

Above All Else

Before I truly met the Lord in a personal way, I was pretty suspicious of this idea of spiritual revelation and communication with God. When I heard Christians saying things like, “I just wait to hear what God will say,” I always felt like that was simply something to say, like a mantra, so that the heart could rest at ease amidst otherwise inexplicable troubles and challenges. This idea of the prophets communicating directly with God and God directly inspiring Christian thought and direction seemed as likely to me as Santa responding to my Christmas list. That simply would not happen. This was my position when it came to the idea of spiritual revelation.

The emergence of the fruit of the Spirit is most often a surprise. The fruit of the Spirit is not a developing seed that we can observe as it grows. The seeds are simply planted and, depending on the soil, they grow. They grow constantly and usually without our knowledge. One of the fruits of spiritual growth I experienced was a total reversal of my old beliefs about spiritual revelation. In other words, as I “conversed” with God, God began to talk back in very perceptible ways.

What I mean by, “conversed,” is that there seemed to be a heightened response time to prayer. This doesn’t mean that every prayer was answered or that I received everything I prayed for. However, I saw responses to my prayers when it came to spiritual leadership: which way to go so as to better serve him and bring glory to him. I saw a shift in how these prayers were answered in real time. In some instances these answers came before the prayer was even finished. It is such an experience that inspired this series of reflections.

Early one Saturday morning in Daegu, South Korea, as I was walking to the first Bible study of the weekend, I found myself making my way down the usual list of intercessory prayers for family and friends. At this moment in time there were several members of my family, distant and immediate, that were encountering obstacles and challenges in their lives. I found myself asking God what I should pray, and how I should pray, for each of them. Before I could finish my “prayer for prayer,” my train of thought and inner-monologue seemed abruptly interrupted by four distinct statements. These statements were statements I had never heard before and was not in the process of constructing before they suddenly appeared. They came suddenly. Out of the blue.

It went like this:

*Father, above all else, give me;
Courage to take you into the storm,
Clarity to find you in the storm and,
Joy when I discover you in the storm.*

I was amazed at the clarity of the prayer. Not only did it apply to all of my family members and simultaneously address all of their distinctly personal issues, it related three ideas that I found so foundational and applicable to all Christians, regardless of where a person is in their spiritual growth. They were three things that I believe all Christians should be mindful of as we take each progressive step along the narrow path following the footsteps of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Over the next three weeks, we'll be looking at each of the three parts of that prayer: **courage, clarity, and joy**.

Courage

Courage to take God into our storms.

One thing we can all unanimously agree on is that life is not easy. Jesus never hesitated to make this clear to his disciples:

"In this world you will have trouble..."

This world has been broken and we all experience its brokenness daily. The days that we view to be perfect are few and far between, typically outweighed by days are a struggle in some form or another. It is in the face of these daily "storms" that, as Christians, we are meant to carry our cross, to never stop "running the race," to finish while also continuing to "fight the good fight."

This holy expectation is much more easily said than done. When we face life as we know it, with all of its uncompromising and unaccommodating

realities, it can be a challenge to “just have faith.” Using our own power to manipulate a situation or force an outcome seems more appealing and realistic than turning toward a higher, and unseen power. Turning to God and seeking His direction and power is always something that, as Christians, we know we ought to do but is more often than not something we feel is quite impossible to do.

When we hear the word, “courage,” we often conjure up images of a person who takes on a situation in a way that is not typical, a way quite unlike the way the rest of us would. We apply it to soldiers, firefighters and people suffering severe oppression without giving up or quitting. We wish we had more of it, or any of it. Courage is not normal. It’s fitting for the superheroes among us, but not something that the average person can ever entirely possess.

Courage is simply doing something that most people would not because of fear, whether of harm or failure or anything else. It’s to do something that seems unlikely to succeed but admirable to attempt. In addressing courage through these eyes that we see the heart of Christianity.

Christianity was, at its foundation, inauspicious. In a quick overview of the initial years of this new religious sect called “The Way,” it is a surprise that it ever went anywhere beyond the neighborhoods nestled in the hill towns dispersed throughout Israel, let alone expand into the global faith that it is today. In its delicate beginnings, there was every reason to believe that this sect would quickly die out, and that the world would soon forget or never hear the name ‘Jesus of Nazareth,’ within several decades of his death. As for the Christians that followed Jesus and continued to preach the Gospel, there was every reason to believe that their message would die out as they gradually did. These men and women held no powerful social standing or political influence to make their growing faith a force to reckon with. They were predominantly peasants and outcasts, with limited resources, preaching a word that condemned them to brutal persecution and social oppression. However, regardless of the dire state of things, they continued to believe, they continued to preach and they continued to experience the living God.

Courage.

From day to day we all encounter difficulties that seem hopeless or at least try us, emotionally or physically. These difficulties could reduce faith in Jesus to wishful thinking or outlandish mythology. But upon reaching this crossroad it is clear that only one road requires courage and the other does not. Taking on our problems ourselves is not only void of courage but, as a Christian, quite pathetic. To seek the power that was despised and rejected, to seek the council of the Spirit that no one understands is to do the one thing that no one would expect you to do. Holding true to a minority position often requires courage. It is in the minority that a Christian truly finds Jesus. Considering this, the choice to take Jesus into the storms of our lives is courageous. In doing so, we find common ground with our brothers and sisters of the early Church. Their choice to take Jesus to every storm they encountered paved the way for us. They witnessed the end of the statement of Jesus as well as the beginning:

“In this world, you will have trouble...”

But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Clarity

Clarity to find Him in the storm.

It is neither new nor uncommon for a Christian to cry out in prayer for relief in the face of opposition or difficulty. At times we spiritually scream at the top of our lungs for help. There are times when we do the courageous thing and take the glory of Jesus Christ into the storm and then await rescue. With every passing moment that deliverance is delayed, we begin to doubt the decision to trust in the word and take it literally into the storm. These can be moments that test our faith in far greater ways than the initial crossroad where we chose to trust the words of Jesus and allow him to overcome. These are the moments where we gasp for air in the fiery furnace or strain to maintain spiritual centeredness as the refining fire scorches our sensitive Christian skin. The promise of deliverance has been made, the leap of faith to trust in the promise has been leapt, and now all that remains is to wait for a miracle.

The way we approach this “refining fire” and the way we understand its purpose will shape our view of our existence in the flames. If we view God as completely outside of the flames, then what we experience within is severe loneliness and helplessness. When we are up against a difficult situation there are few greater burdens placed on the human heart than that of isolation and loneliness. The feeling of being alone magnifies the suffering and heightens the pain. If we view God as outside of our current situation, we limit our experience with God and his promise to be “God with us.” We find ourselves without hope.

A God that does not enter the flames with you is either a God that does not care about your current suffering, or has no control to do anything about the situation. Either way, with a God outside of the flames, there is little hope left to hold on to.

Of course, the opposing perspective is a God that follows us into the flames.

As we begin to feel the heat of the fire, the prayer that is usually first to emerge is, “God, get me out!” In some cases, maybe that prayer is answered directly: we are rescued from the flames unscathed and alive. But both the Bible and our own lives are full of evidence that such moments of the miraculous are not prevalent. More often than not, we remain in the blaze, seeking answers and explanations to our delayed rescue.

The question of suffering is a difficult one for most non-Christians to grasp and sometimes more difficult for Christians to explain. When discussing Christianity with non-Christians, the issue of suffering and a God that allows its continued existence is always an issue: ‘Why would a good God allow so much suffering? Pain? Death? Destruction?’ There are plenty of answers and explanations for this question. But often in answering it, I find myself simply left with “I don’t know.”

There are biblical explanations to explain the nature of suffering in this world: the Fall of Man in Genesis 3, for example. However, explaining the very real presence of suffering by referring to a story of a garden with fruit trees, naked humans, snakes and flaming swords hardly satisfies the troubled mind. But while we cannot know the whys and purposes and resolutions of suffering, we can explain what the reasons cannot be. It

cannot be because we have a God that does not care for us and it cannot be because our God does not have the power to stop it.

Throughout the Bible we read time after time that God can put out flames of suffering and sorrow whenever he desired at a moments notice. We know that he performed miracles repeatedly, from Scriptural accounts as well as in the lives of many people living today. Therefore, the question remains: Why does he allow suffering to continue? The only explanation from a God that claims to have plans beyond our understanding is that the suffering exists for a greater purpose. Perhaps the suffering persists so that greater healing can be revealed and experienced. If we are willing to plead ignorance concerning the presence of suffering in this world, we must be willing to admit ignorance concerning the purpose.

Against difficulty, against pain, the first option is to quit and give up. Our suffering is too much to handle. The effort to fight and overcome seems hopeless. Quitting seems to be the most reasonable and pain saving option. But the truth about quitting is that, in most cases, quitting does not satisfy. Instead, it brings regret. The second option is to take heart and continue onward. Whether coming from a religious or non-religious background, most people agree that the decision to press onward through suffering typically results in a stage or period in life that we look back on and value.

All throughout the Bible we see moments where God chooses to allow suffering to persist. In each instance where suffering is allowed to persist there follows a greater moment of healing that proved to be the original purpose of the suffering. Whether it is the story of Joseph or the story of Lazarus, God always expresses a desire to bring about more healing than what we could have possibly foreseen. This multiplication of healing is born out of the seeds of suffering.

The God of the Bible is never unclear about the realities of suffering or his views on our suffering. He sees it, he knows it, and he never stops caring. In the Bible, we see a God that accompanied his believers into the flames for all to see, a God that accompanies us into our human experience to truly be called, "Emmanuel." The God of the Bible cannot exist outside of the flames of suffering because he is God with us.

Joy.

Joy when we discover Him in the storm.

For most of my life as a Christian the word “joy” was a word I would rarely use to describe my Christian identity. More appropriate words might have been words like “duty,” “routine,” “confusion,” “obligation.” Rarely anything in the vicinity of “joy.”

In my Christian life, there was little to take joy in. God was a distant, silent God that I did not know personally. The experiences of Christian life were nice, but far from transforming. I had a wonderful upbringing in a Christian household. My joy in being Christian had everything to do with my family and nothing to do with God and his son Jesus.

Lacking the joy of following God, I was surprised and confused to find, when reading the Bible for the first time, that God would prefer it that we stop following altogether than to follow joylessly. I always thought that God desired obedience above all else and cared little whether we liked obeying Him or not. It was shocking that God viewed my motivation to serve him and the way I enjoyed said service as the highest importance. Why did he care?

As I continued reading I saw, over and over, that God viewed his relationship to us like a marriage. The more I started to see how he viewed our relationship, the more I realized that I had been a quite unenthusiastic and uncommitted bride (Christian) to one particular bridegroom (God). **The more I realized that God desired to have a relationship with me like that of a married couple, the more I realized that it would be more offensive to me if he *didn't* care if I lacked joy in being with him.** To approach such a close relationship with passivity implies disinterest and indifference, ultimately worse than hate. At least hate brings a passion to fight, defend and protest. To approach God from such apathy is to express the perfect anti-love. I began to realize that this “anti-love” fit me.

At the same time I began to understand those Christians who showed such joy in being “married” to him. Their reactions to God’s presence were like they were embracing a loved one after long absence. This sense of

anxious, unbridled enthusiasm was not only common to all of these people, but also came naturally. Not forced, and not in response to a demand.

It's so easy to lose this sense of joy in Christian life. In the world we live in that continues to take more than we are able to offer, there comes a time that, in terms of a newly married couple, the honeymoon is over and real life begins. We still define ourselves by our faith, but less and less so the way we did during the honeymoon. Honeymooners are easy to pick out of a crowd because they cannot get enough of each other. But even after the honeymoon, people that love to be married are easy to spot because there is a sense of peace, joy and happiness in their togetherness. To them, being together is far superior to being apart. The question all Christians should continue to ask themselves is, "Can I get enough of God?" Or, on the other hand, "Have I had enough?"

Remember Bartimaeus? Just days away from the cross, as Jesus journeyed to Jerusalem, he was confronted by a voice from the crowd. The scream from the crowd was from a blind man named Bartimaeus, and his reason for screaming was that his faith in the healing power of Jesus was demanding a healing and a life-change on the spot. Here is a man who would not let Jesus go without an encounter. The jeers and judgmental thoughts of those along the roadside, including the disciples, did not intimidate or deter him. He wanted Jesus and nothing would stop him. And when he received his healing, he followed Jesus.

Bartimaeus needed Jesus. He cried out for Jesus. He was overjoyed when he found him. Are you?

Above all else, in and out of storms, fires, humdrum days and nights, excitement and stillness, remember the joy of salvation. This God comes with us into life, makes himself known there, and wants nothing more than joy in his presence.