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Sermon Notes

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From “Success” to Suffering: The Pinnacle of Faith

Hebrews 11:35-38

Dear friends, as Christians, you belong to an amazing heritage of brothers and sisters:

1 Peter 2:9 ¶ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

There has been a glorious trail of blood that has been paid to advance the gospel as far as it has:

John 12:24 Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

In the first three centuries of church history, the blood of martyrs was SEED for the church of Jesus Christ as it spiritually conquered the Roman Empire

During the Reformation, John Foxe wrote his famous “Acts and Monuments of the Christian Church”... more commonly known as “Foxe’s Book of Martyrs” ... his purpose was to encourage the suffering Protestant church who were being oppressed during the reign of “Bloody Mary”...

In our present time, many of us are following the story of Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani in Iran, who refuses to be released from prison so that he can maintain his Christian testimony; he is accused of renouncing the Muslim faith and is condemned to die by hanging... that execution could happen at any time now;

The cover story of “World Magazine” is on the tremendous suffering of Christians in Nigeria at the hands of Muslims; it shows a man whose head and shoulders are bandaged from the bloody wounds he received from a machete-wielding Muslim attacker

The suffering of Christians in many places in the world is one of the great untold stories of our day; in Bangladesh in January of this year, some Muslim demonstrators surrounded a Christian orphanage and screamed and intimidated them, claiming they were stealing Muslim babies to make them into Christians, and that they were engaged in baby trafficking... these are orphans that NO ONE ELSE WAS CARING FOR!!! The mob got violent and attacked one of the Christian workers, striking him in the head

I. The “Continental Divide” of Hebrews 11

A. Continental Divides

1. A continental divide is a line usually running along a mountain range which divides the flow of river water based on where that water will eventually end up
2. The main continental divide in North America, called the Continental Divide of the Americas, runs generally along the peaks of the Rocky Mountains... it divides the river systems that eventually drain into the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico from those river systems that eventually drain into the Pacific Ocean
3. Basically: everything west goes to the Pacific; everything east goes to the Atlantic

B. In The Middle of Verse 35, Suddenly, Everything Changes

1. Hebrews 11 has a divide of sorts as well, and it happens right in the middle of verse 35
2. From verse 32 through verse 35a, we have one story after another of dramatic SUCCESSES of FAITH

Hebrews 11:32-35 Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. ³⁵Women received back their dead, raised to life again.

3. Suddenly, in verse 35, everything changes

Hebrews 11:35-38 Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. ³⁶Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. ³⁷They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated-- ³⁸the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

C. Heroic Achievements of Faith vs. Heroic Suffering for the Faith

1. By faith, all these successes happened... the HAPPY OUTCOME was achieved

2. BUT faith also brings about great suffering... the in some cases, the greater the faith the greater the suffering
3. This is the general movement of sanctification... to wean God's people more and more from needing earthly success and prosperity and favorable outcomes to being willing to LOSE EVERYTHING OF VALUE for the sake of the Kingdom of Christ
4. I'm not saying that the successes of vss. 32-35a are to be minimized... NO... they are to be celebrated

D. Women Received Back their Dead Raised to Life Again

Hebrews 11:35 Women received back their dead, raised to life again.

1. Again, the "faith" chapter... the clear indication is that these resurrections were achieved BY FAITH
2. The human instruments of this DEATH-DEFYING FAITH in the OT were Elijah and Elisha
3. Elijah's story
 - a. Elijah stayed with a widow in Zarephath who trusted God and cared for him during the famine
 - b. Her jar of oil and flour never ran out as God provided day after day
 - c. BUT one day her became sick... he grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing

1 Kings 17:18-24 man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?" ¹⁹"Give me your son," Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. ²⁰Then he cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" ²¹Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried to the LORD, "O LORD my God, let this boy's life return to him!" ²²The LORD heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. ²³Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, "Look, your son is alive!" ²⁴Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth."

- d. This is the FIRST RECORD of a resurrection in the Bible... achieved by faith
4. Elisha's story

- a. A childless woman cared for the prophet... he asked "What can I do for you to repay your kindness to me?" The woman refused to ask for anything, but Elisha's servant recommended that he pray for her to have a son
- b. The woman did not ask for a son, but God gave her one anyway
- c. The child grew, and a few years later, suddenly he screamed that his head hurt... he was taken to his mother, and the boy lay across her lap and eventually died
- d. She sent for the Man of God and eventually expressed to him her intense anger and sorrow:

2 Kings 4:28 Did I ask you for a son, my lord?" she said. "Didn't I tell you, 'Don't raise my hopes'?"

- e. But in an amazing display of faith, Elisha raised this little boy as well

2 Kings 4:32-37 When Elisha reached the house, there was the boy lying dead on his couch.³³ He went in, shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. ³⁴ Then he got on the bed and lay upon the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out upon him, the boy's body grew warm. ³⁵ Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got on the bed and stretched out upon him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes. ³⁶ Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite." And he did. When she came, he said, "Take your son." ³⁷ She came in, fell at his feet and bowed to the ground. Then she took her son and went out.

- 5. This is the centerpiece of Hebrews 11: a FAITH THAT CONQUERS DEATH
- 6. So the Author RIGHTLY celebrates the resurrection of these boys and the joy of their mothers
- E. But Sometimes, God Calls Faith-Filled People to Great Suffering
- F. Why??? Five Reasons
 - 1. To put the character and courage of the faith-filled hero on display
 - 2. To put the Truth of the Gospel on a platform for all to see its glory
 - 3. To strengthen the faith of weaker Christians
- G. How Do We Reconcile Promises of Earthly Blessing with These Examples of Great Suffering?
 - 1. The Promises of God

Deuteronomy 28:1-6 If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. ² All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God: ³ You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. ⁴ The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock-- the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. ⁵ Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed. ⁶ You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.

2. When do these NOT HAPPEN for Christians? TWO REASONS

- a. When our sins call down God's disciplines on our lives
- b. When God desires to put our faith on display and strengthen it by trial

II. The Pinnacle of Faith: Suffering Because of Christ

A. Satan's Greatest Trial:

- 1. Deny Your Faith and Save Your Body; OR...
- 2. Stand Firm in Your Faith and Suffer

B. Afflictions listed here: suffering specifically because of FAITH

- 1. Not discussing general sufferings common to all
- 2. Medical sufferings NOT IN VIEW: disease, pain, accidents
- 3. Financial troubles NOT IN VIEW
- 4. Natural disasters NOT IN VIEW
- 5. Everyday life accidents NOT IN VIEW
- 6. What is "in view"? The suffering brought on specifically because of our faith in Christ

C. Faith's Greatest Triumph

- 1. Parable of the Soils: the "Rocky Soil" exposed by persecution

Matthew 13:20-21 The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹ But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away.

- 2. Faith vindicated as genuine

Romans 5:3-4 Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope.

3. Perspective of Hebrews 11 MOST CLEARLY DISPLAYED in these kinds of sufferings
 - a. “earth is NOT MY HOME”... I’m just passing through
 - b. I am living for the city that is to come, whose architect and builder is God
 - c. No suffering I am going through here on earth even comes close to what God is giving me

Romans 8:18 ¶ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

2 Corinthians 4:17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison

III. Specific Sufferings Listed

- A. Tortured
- B. Refused to Be Released
 1. Opportunity to get out of the suffering is offered but refused
 2. They could gain their freedom... perhaps even in some ways be rewarded
 3. BUT ONLY if they deny their faith, turn their backs on Jesus Christ, repudiate knowing Him... that cost is INFINITELY HIGH
 4. Two clear examples: John Bunyan, Youcef Nadarkhani
 - a. John Bunyan: pastor/preacher of a small, illegal non-conformist congregation in 17th century England; one of the most astonishingly gifted preachers of all time; arrested for preaching without a license, put in the Bedford Jail; was separated from his beloved wife Elizabeth and his blind daughter, Mary, and other children; he said the separation from them was like the plucking of his flesh from his bones; the entire time he was being held, however, the authorities simply wanted him to pledge not to preach anymore at secret assemblies; Bunyan refused to compromise—he said, “If you release me today, I shall preach tomorrow!” The key to his release from imprisonment was always in his own hand... all he had to do was to promise not to preach. But he willingly stayed in the jail for twelve years, though some lax jailers allowed him to slip away to preach in the nearby woods from time to time

b. Pastor Youcef also was offered his freedom from jail in Iran... all he had to do was to confess that Muhammad was a prophet sent from God; this he could not do

C. Mocking

1. The idea of ridicule is prominent here
2. That people would gather around these heroes and heroines of the faith and lack them to scorn
3. They did the same to Jesus... even while He was dying on the cross
4. So Satan seems to delight to have his people make jokes and demean the servants of the living God

D. Flogging

1. This is being whipped so severely that if it is not stopped, it could be fatal
2. The Apostle Paul underwent various forms of flogging/beatings

2 Corinthians 11:24-25 Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods

E. Chains and Prison

1. One simple and terrible trial: imprisonment... the loss of freedom
2. Christians have often been imprisoned for their faith

F. Stoned

G. Sawed in Two

H. Put to Death by the Sword

I. Wandering about

J. Sheepskins and Goatskins

K. Destitute

L. Persecuted and Mistreated

M. Homeless: Deserts, Mountains, Caves, Holes in the Ground

N. Key concept: BY FAITH they suffered

1. Sometimes God's sovereign power is loosed to deliver His people FROM these terrible trials and to rescue them
 - a. God could turn the heart of the torturer away from continuing to torture...
“The blood of martyrs is seed for the church” = sometimes the torturers themselves are converted when they see the faith of the people
 - b. Or perhaps God could just intervene and stop the torturer from his action:

Genesis 20:6 Then God said to [Abimelech] in the dream, "Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her.

- c. But God does not always do that
 - d. God could cause the torturer to DROP DEAD in the midst of the torture, as He did with King Herod in the midst of a vile speech in which he accepted worship as a god
 - e. God can feed starving people miraculously with ravens or by sending an angel
 - f. God can ALLEViate THE SUFFERING OF ANY PERSON ANY TIME HE CHOOSES
2. BUT ALSO sometimes God's sovereign power is unleashed in enabling His children to endure the great pain and give a great witness to Christ

IV. Reason Given: Seeking the Better Resurrection (vs. 35)

Hebrews 11:35 Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection.

- A. What is the “Better Resurrection”?
 1. Obviously these suffering, faith-filled people felt that to accept release would be detrimental to their eternal state
 2. Resurrection = the NEXT world, not this one
 3. They were looking beyond the immediate circumstances to their heavenly rewards
 4. In some sense, though they were being tortured, they had already left their bodies and their earthly circumstances behind... like Stephen, who saw heaven opened up
- B. Option #1: Better Resurrection = Resurrection in Jesus rather than Outside of Him

Acts 24:15 there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.

John 5:28-29 "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice²⁹ and come out-- those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.

The “better resurrection” = the resurrection of the righteous to eternal reward

C. Option #2: Better Resurrection = Greater Rewards at the Resurrection of the Righteous

1. The idea is that martyrs will receive a greater reward in heaven because they suffered so much on earth
2. This may well be the case:

Matthew 5:12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

BUT...

D. I think Option #1 is the best... the sense is that the only way they could be released was to renounce Christ, and they could not do that without questioning their very salvation... they would have been among those who shrank back to the destruction of their souls:

Hebrews 10:39 ¶ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

V. Assessment: The World was Not Worthy of them (vs. 38)

Hebrews 11:38 the world was not worthy of them.

- A. The World = the Sinful, Satanic world system that was persecuting them
- B. The World deserved judgment and wrath for persecuting them... and God will do such at the end of the world

Revelation 16:4-6 The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood.⁵ Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters say: "You are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, the Holy One, because you have so judged; ⁶ for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve."

- C. Instead, God blessed the world with their witness, their example, their faith, their courage, their love
 1. Stephen died blessing his persecutors

Acts 7:59-60 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep

2. William Tyndale died praying for King Henry VIII who had ordered his execution: "Lord, open the King of England's eyes"
3. This cold, vicious, Christ-hating world with its sadistic tortures and its selfish seizures of property and its cold-blooded murders WAS NOT WORTHY of the meek, humble, faith-filled men and women God sent to preach the gospel to them

VI. Applications

A. Christ Refused to be Released so YOU Might Gain a Better Resurrection

1. Christ's courage in the face of His own death gives you more than just a great example to follow
2. THAT IS THE GOSPEL!!!
3. He died on the cross so that we might "gain a better resurrection" ...

B. What About Us? What to do if Persecution is Honestly Alien to Your Life

1. Understand that Christian in every generation have also been tempted to SHRINK BACK from pain in confessing Christ
 - a. Part of the reason for the book of Hebrews itself was to urge that first century generation of Christians NOT TO SHRINK BACK from confessing Christ
 - b. They were afraid of losing things, afraid of imprisonment, afraid of death
 - c. So the author writes these kinds of things to them:

Hebrews 10:32-39 Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. ³³ Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. ³⁴ You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. ³⁵ So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. ³⁶ You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. ³⁷ For in just a very little while, "He who is coming will come and will not delay. ³⁸ But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him." ³⁹ ¶ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.

d. And again:

Hebrews 12:4 In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

e. And again:

Hebrews 13:12-13 Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. ¹³ Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.

f. So first century Christians were not Supermen and Superwomen who were unlike us... they also needed encouragement and the power of the Holy Spirit to face their own fears and their desire for a comfortable life

2. Some American Christians are persecuted for their faith

- a. We read stories about famous Christians who make clear statements about Christ and receive some backlash for them
- b. Tim Tebow was one such example; Adrian Gonzalez as well
- c. World magazine and other Christian media outlets keep us well informed of Christian school teachers or elected officials or newscasters or other people who in some way are castigated for their Christian convictions
- d. But that doesn't mean I personally have suffered for my faith...
- e. If I read honestly the words of Hebrews 11:35-38, I have to say that I have rarely been persecuted for my faith in Christ, though I know the NT speaks at great length about being willing to lay down my life for Christ... and as a student of church history, I know that many brothers and sisters have not loved their lives so much as to shrink from death
- f. WHAT ABOUT US???

3. Give thanks for religious freedom

- a. Simply put, it was because others fought and died for religious liberty that we have freedom of religion in the US today
- b. In John Bunyan's day in England (17th century), simple assemblies of Baptists to worship on Sunday were called "illegal conventicles" and were hunted down by the authorities... pastors put in prison; so, to be willing simply to meet for Sunday worship would have put the common Christian in danger of arrest; the same is true in China's house churches today

- c. But because of the American Revolution and those who wrote the Constitution, Americans have the freedom to worship without government interference;
 - d. Unfortunately in our day, some influential people feel the what was really established was the “freedom FROM religion” not freedom OF religion; therefore, there may come a time of greater suffering for genuine Christians who do not embrace that all religions make equally valid truth claims... to be forced to say that all religions are equally TRUE was never in the mind of the framers of the Constitution... just that all religions had the right to exercise their beliefs in peace
 - e. At any rate, because of the courage and vision of people in past centuries, we Americans can worship in peace, free from government interference
 - f. For that, we should simply GIVE THANKS and not feel guilty that we are not as courageous as our Chinese brothers and sisters
4. Recognize smaller ways that normal Christians are persecuted
- a. Just because we are not arrested and tortured and burned at the stake does not mean that we have not been persecuted
 - b. Many passages in the NT speak of simple INSULTS as a form of persecution

Matthew 5:11-12 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

1 Thessalonians 2:2 We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi

- c. Jesus mentioned being “excluded” as a form of persecution

Luke 6:22 Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

- d. So, when you find yourselves left out of something, or passed over for promotions at work, or struggling to make friends in a worldly setting, it MAY BE that you are suffering some kind of persecution for your faith
- e. Family struggles because of Christ can also be a form of persecution

Matthew 10:35-36 I have come to turn "'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law-- ³⁶ a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.'

f. So, it is almost certain that all of you who have genuinely stood for Christ in your lives have at SOME LEVEL been persecuted for it

g. BUT having said that, let's be realistic... the cost we've paid has been far less than those who laid down their lives for Jesus

John 15:13 Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

h. These other persecutions are evidences of love for Christ... but it is a LESSER love than the greater love Christ commands of the martyrs

5. Be willing to evangelize more boldly... and you will be persecuted; Be willing to stand up for public righteousness in unpopular issues... and you will be persecuted

a. Part of the reason we may all feel a little guilty when we are not persecuted like those in the Sudan or in Iran is that we recognize that we could be more persecuted in our culture if we EVANGELIZED more boldly, or stood up more boldly for righteous causes

b. In effect, you can dial in the amount of suffering you want by how much you witness... and this FEAR OF MAN holds all of us back from being more fruitful as witnesses

c. We know that if we just CUT LOOSE from those fears and boldly and consistently share our faith, we will eventually meet up with increasing opposition and be persecuted...

d. In a similar way, if you stand up for righteousness in the abortion issue and speak boldly for the PREBORN, you will be persecuted; or if you get involved vigorously in the MARRIAGE PROTECTION AMENDMENT that is coming before the state of North Carolina on May 8th ... you will meet the wrath of the pro-homosexual agenda... but it's still worth doing!!

e. NOW: desiring to be persecuted is not a good motive for these actions... we should do them because of God's call in our lives

f. But maybe a passage like this one from Hebrews will help us not fear the reprisals of the world so much

6. Be aware of Christians around the world who are being persecuted... pray for them and do what you can to aid them

a. There are several very good sources of information about the world-wide persecuted church

b. "Voice of the Martyrs" and "Persecution Project" "Present Truth Ministries" are great resources

- c. So also is “World Magazine” from time to time
 - d. Study their situations and join with them in their struggle by praying to God for them
7. Prepare yourselves, your children and your grandchildren for the possibility of open persecution in the US
- a. Our situation here in the US is unstable
 - b. Freedom and peace for evangelical Christians to gather, worship, evangelize, preach, publish, and simply live is the EXCEPTION not the rule in church history
 - c. We are probably in a decaying orbit of freedom here in the US
 - d. Prepare yourselves AND your children and your grandchildren for coming persecution
 - e. The reign of the Antichrist will be characterized by martyrdom

Revelation 13:7 He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them.

Revelation 13:15 He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed.

Revelation 20:4 And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands.

Revelation 12:11 They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.

- f. Learn, prepare, grow...
- g. May it be said of you

THE WORLD WAS NOT WORTHY OF THEM