

“Aliens and Exiles: 2) When We Are Tested”

a sermon by

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Text: “In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer serious trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (I Peter 1:6-7).

Ministers, like everyone else, often find themselves tested. I was reminded of that this week upon reading an article that appeared in the *Christian Century* by Will Willimon, who for a number of years served as the Dean of Chapel at Duke University. On the day that Jerry Falwell died several weeks ago, someone has Willimon if he had ever met Dr. Falwell in person. “Met him?” replied Willimon, “he almost got me fired.”

Willimon referred to a time some years ago when a Duke student challenged Willimon to invite Falwell to speak at the university. Never imagining that Falwell might say “yes” to such an invitation, Willimon wrote a letter to the famous evangelist inviting him to come to Duke and speak to the students there. Much to his surprise and chagrin Willimon received a reply from Falwell that he would be honored to come to Duke. By this time Willimon was in somewhat a panic that Falwell was actually going to come to the university to speak. So Dr. Willimon wrote another letter, noting that the university did not have a lot of money for guest speaker’s honoraria and that he could only offer to pay travel expenses. Once again he received a quick reply from the Baptist preacher, stating that no honorarium was needed, since the honor of speaking at Duke was payment enough. As for travel expenses, Falwell noted that he had his own private jet, so that all travel expenses would be on him.

When Willimon asked the President of the University if she would like to introduce Falwell, she responded, “Are you crazy?”

Although Willimon was determined not to give this event a lot of publicity, word quickly got out and there were a series of protests that the Dean of the Chapel had invited to the campus this minister whom they viewed as representing a “a closed minded, racist, homophobic, self-

righteous, incendiary rhetoric.” “We liberals,” observed Willimon, “are nothing if not open-minded.”

When the day of Falwell’s visit finally arrived, there was a large crowd present. Willimon had the unenviable job of both introducing the speaker, while trying to distance himself from him. When Falwell rose to speak, he immediately noted what an honor it was for him to be at such a great Christian university. He went on to observe that Duke, like Princeton, Harvard, and Yale University, had all been founded by Christian groups to whom they owed their very existence.

During the question and answer session a young woman asked Falwell how many African Americans attended Liberty University. The speaker acknowledged that it was a hard question and represented his greatest failure as the founder of Liberty. He noted that he had worked very hard to recruit minority students. In fact, he had even met on the subject a number of times with Coretta Scott King. But despite his best efforts Falwell reported that the school had only 12 percent minority students. He then asked the students at Duke if they knew the percentage of African American students at Duke. The answer, he told them, was 6 percent. In fact, he went on to say, one of the things that almost prevented him from coming to speak at Duke was the fact that he was concerned about a school that had such vast resources and such a poor record on the number of minority students.

By the time Falwell had finished, noted Willimon, he had received a warm ovation from a very hostile crowd. As for Willimon, he was left to wonder how a Baptist preacher could manage to turn a tough academic crowd into putty in a preacher’s hand.

I.

Testing comes in many different ways, as the writer of I Peter notes. This letter, which is the focus of the sermons over the next weeks, is a letter written to “Aliens and Exiles.” As the letter states, the recipients were churches in Asia Minor, in what is today the western part of the nation of Turkey. They were a long way from the mother church in Jerusalem and they were under constant persecution from the Roman Empire. The writer of I Peter speaks of the great inheritance that the churches in that area have received. They were recipients of the gospel preached by the Apostles. And even though they had never seen Jesus or heard him speak, they loved him, believed in him, and had received the salvation that Jesus had promised. In this passage he speaks of the “trials” that the members of the church have had to endure. These trials, the author concludes, are the means by which our faith is strengthened and that is as true today as it was in the early church.

II.

Times of testing are times in which our faith is tested, and who we prove to be in these times determines to a large degree the type of person we are.

Two weekends ago I visited my daughter Lucy in Washington, D.C. Late on Saturday afternoon we took a cab down to the Mall and visited the Vietnam Memorial and the Lincoln

Memorial. I have visited the Vietnam memorial on a number of occasions but I never do so without being moved by the number of young men and women who lost their lives in that war. A number of the names were people I knew from my years at Davidson College—promising young men with great futures before them.

Then, we walked over to the Lincoln memorial. Most American historians would view Lincoln as one of the greatest of our Presidents, if not the greatest. But in many ways, Lincoln's life was filled with tragedy and disappointment. As a young lawyer in Springfield, Illinois, he ran for the state legislature and was defeated. He tried business and failed in that as well, spending a number of years paying the debts of a worthless partner. He fell passionately in love with a young woman, only to lose her to death. He was elected to the United States Congress in 1846, served one term, and was defeated for re-election. He then tried to secure an appointment with the United States Land Office and failed in that. He was a candidate for a seat in the United States Senate, but was not elected. In 1856 he was a candidate for the Vice Presidency and was defeated. When he was elected President of the United States in 1860 he found himself facing a Civil War he would have given his life to prevent. But even as you enter that memorial today, it is hard not to be aware that no matter how much we might deplore the hardships and heartaches he faced, we also know that the quality of his character never could have come from ease, comfort, and pleasantness alone. He did not simply endure his tragedies. He made something out of them.

Grief and pain can add a new dimension to life. No hardship, no resiliency; no suffering, no sympathy; no pain, no patience. We may not like that kind of world, but that is the kind of world in which we live.

III.

There is another dimension to these times of testing. They are times in which our faith is tested, and it is precisely these testings that make our faith strong.

Certainly that was true of the churches to which the epistle of I Peter is addressed. The author of I Peter speaks of the genuineness of their faith being tested by fire. That is consistent with the witness of Scripture from beginning to end. Recall the Bible similes for trouble. It is a "refiner's fire." It can separate the gold in us from the alloy. It is "tribulation"—that is a threshing by which the grain in us is separated from the chaff. It is a "chastening"—it can discipline, correct, and purify us.

Now, do not misunderstand me. I am not singing a hymn of praise to trouble. We all dread it, but ultimately we will all have to deal with it. When trouble comes, some people end in defeat and in collapse. Others—thank God—can say with the Apostle Paul, "We triumph in our troubles."

One of the most famous sermons ever preached was preached in the Beechgrove Church in Aberdeen, Scotland, by a minister named Arthur John Gossip. The title of the sermon was "When Life Tumbles In, What Then?" and it was preached just a few days after Gossip's wife died suddenly from a strange illness that seem to come out of nowhere. Even though it was

preached over a hundred years ago, it still has a certain power and immediacy that has not diminished over the years.

In that sermon he speaks of the hope that we have in Christ that sustains us in the darkness of our lives. Gossip put it like this: “You people in the sunshine may believe the faith, but we in the shadow must believe it. We have nothing else.”

Then, in the conclusion of the sermon, he makes a very powerful witness to the true nature of faith. “I don’t think you need be afraid of life. Our hearts are very frail; and there are places where the road is very steep and very lonely. But we have a wonderful God. And as Paul puts it, what can separate us from His love? Not death, he says immediately, pushing that aside at once as the most obvious of all impossibilities.”

He then goes on to say, “No, not death. For, standing in the roaring of the Jordan, cold to the heart with its dreadful chill, and very conscious of the terror of its rushing, I too, like Hopeful, can call back to you who one day in your turn will have to cross it, ‘Be of good cheer, my brother, for I feel the bottom, and it is sound.’”

IV.

Times of testing can do something else for us. They can cleanse us from some very dangerous illusions. Scott Peck, a well know psychiatrist, begins his famous book *The Road Less Travelled* with the sentence that life is not fair. There is probably no more dangerous illusion in religion or in life than the notion that life always has to be fair. Sometimes I wonder where we got that notion. Certainly not from the Bible. Was life fair to Jesus? Was the cross just? When he turned his face to go to Jerusalem, did he think that he was going to be treated fairly?

Surely, there is no greater witness to the life of faith than those who faced some great hardship without expectation that they would somehow be spared great pain. One thinks of a young woman in the Old Testament by the name of Esther, risking her life for her people, saying, “If I perish, I perish.” Or Sir Thomas More, on the gallows facing death, saying, “I die the King’s good servant, but God’s servant first.” Or Jesus, praying in the garden of Gethsemane, “Not my will, but thy will be done.”

Martin Niemoeller was a pastor in the German church who was arrested by the Gestapo for his opposition to Hitler’s Third Reich and placed in prison. In a letter to his church in Berlin he writes: “Let me thank God that he upholds me as he does and allows no spirit of despair to enter into Cell 448. Let the parish office know that in all ignorance of what is coming I am confident, and that I hope to be ready when I am led along paths I would have never chosen for myself.”

That is real faith and it is that faith that gives us light to face whatever darkness surrounds us.

Amen!