**Suffering for Jesus**

*But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that.****22****Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I.****23****Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.****24****Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.****25****Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea;****26****on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;****27****in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.****28****And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.****29****Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?*

***30****If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.****31****The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.****32****At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me,****33****but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands. (2 Corinthians 11:21b-33)*

Like the Apostle, we Armenians suffered for Jesus, but we also continued our lives with Him. Greetings in the name of the Son of God, our Savior Jesus Christ, as we speak today about the subject of suffering and its ensuing events. The subject of the Armenian Genocide is a painful one for all of us. Why did it happen, what meaning can we glean from such a horrific event, and how can we continue our lives in the face of injustice? Each of these questions has a political, cultural and spiritual answer. However, we would not be able to gain any meaning for our faith by only focusing on the fact of suffering. Today’s passage, taken from 2nd Corinthians points out the Apostle Paul’s sufferings and for a moment almost reminds us of our own nation’s tribulations. What is important is to see the common thread between the two – and to form the right inner convictions from seeing this commonality between the two. Again, we Armenians suffered for the love of Jesus, but we also continue on in life with Him alongside us. Let’s talk, then, about suffering and what follows it…

Yes, suffering comes, especially to us as believers, but our calling is to be faithful to the Lord, for as long as He has given us life. The Apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthian church lowered himself to the folly of his adversaries and noted his sufferings. In other words, he took the shame connected to those sufferings and wore them as a badge of honor, even though he considered that folly. He suffered much more than his adversaries – greater labors, imprisonments, beatings, often near death. He was given 39 lashes five different times, beaten with rods three times, pelted with stones, shipwrecked three times, left adrift at sea for a day and a night, always in danger from nature, from robbers, from hostile Jews, hostile Gentiles, danger in the cities, the wilderness, at sea, and from false Christians. He was constantly toiling and in hardship, constantly sleepless, experiencing hunger, thirst, being without food, being in the cold and exposed to the elements. On top of all that, he still felt responsible for the care of the churches he helped bring along. He hurt with those that were weak and burned within when scandals erupted in churches. His shame was so much that even as a holder of Roman citizenship, he was forced to flee from a king in Damascus hiding in a basket and being lower from the wall so as to escape detection.

In the year 320AD, during a cold winter in Sebasteia[[1]](#footnote-1) (of historic Armenian lands), the martyrdom of Christian soldiers occurred in this way: forty soldiers, all Christians, were members of the famed Twelfth Legion of Rome's imperial army. One day their captain told them Emperor Licinius had sent out an edict that all soldiers were to offer sacrifice to the pagan gods. These Christians replied, "You can have our armor and even our bodies, but our hearts' allegiance belongs to Jesus Christ."

It was midwinter of A.D. 320, and the captain had them marched onto a nearby frozen lake. He stripped them of their clothes and said they would either die or renounce Christ. Throughout the night these men huddled together singing their song, "Forty martyrs for Christ." One by one the temperature took its toll and they fell to the ice.

At last, there was only one man left. He lost courage and stumbled to the shore, where he renounced Christ. The officer of the guards had been watching all this. Unknown to the others, he had secretly come to believe in Christ. When he saw this last man break rank, he walked out onto the ice, threw off his clothes, and confessed that he also was a Christian. When the sun rose the next morning, there were forty bodies of soldiers who had fought to the death for Christ.

Many of us commemorate the Genocide today, but still have not understood this dangerous world yet. Some of us still await justice to come from people who follow the ways of this world. However, Jesus told his apostles that the servant is not greater than the master. He said, “*If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you. If they keep my words, they will keep yours.” (John 15:20)*

Here is an important point of analysis: yes, the believer ought not to become weak in faith when persecution or even martyrdom rears its ugly head. Rather, what is important is to keep in perspective the events that follow the suffering. For example, if Jesus had not gone through with the Crucifixion, there would be no atonement of sin and no power of resurrection to overcome eternal death. If our forefathers had not willingly sacrificed their lives, we do not know what the plight of the survivors would have been. If those young Scandinavian missionary girls in their 20s and 30s had not sacrificed their lives and had not come to the lands where the genocide was taking place to care for our forefathers, or grandmothers and grandfathers, we do not know what would have happened to them. We do not even know if we would exist today. If our people did not patiently endure and refuse to give up their faith throughout the countless massacres from the earliest days of our Christian history, we have no idea what our plight would be today.

Yes, it is true that Armenians in their own Armenian lands are once again before a serious political and existential threat. However, if we, as we find ourselves on safer shores, are not strong in our faith in God through these experiences, how are we to be helpful to them in any meaningful way? Yes, it is true that the Armenian Genocide greatly wounded and damaged us as a nation, as followers of Christ….

But God, just as He brought the Apostle Paul to the fruition of his purpose, even accomplishing his mission by writing letters while in jail, has also invited us, as an ethnicity, to answer the call of this current crisis with faith, with courage, and with wisdom. Let us not be hopeless, faithless, like the heathen who primarily rely on the strength of their own ability and their guns (instead of putting God first). Rather, our call is to recognize our critical ethnic situation soberly, but to look to God not just as a psychological compass, but also as a source of inspiration for practical deeds of help.

It is true that we as Christian will not be able to flee the minions of satan and their deeds in this world; however, our weapon of choice is called to be persistence with Christ’s help, just as the Apostle Paul endured his hardships patiently and continue his mission, always trusting in the Lord until his very last breath… So, just like him, we Armenians suffered for Jesus, but also continue our path with Him. May the Lord bless you all as we commemorate and pledge our allegiance to God in the face of all suffering, even death itself.

1. Or Sepastia, depending on regional pronunciation… [↑](#footnote-ref-1)