

1 PETER 4:18, 19

MEMORIAL FOR A SUFFERING SAINT

“If the righteous is scarcely saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”

Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.”

Heroes and heroines are seldom as we imagine they should be. In our minds, heroines and heroes are bigger than life—bold and exciting, slaying dragons and rescuing imperiled people. In reality, our heroes and heroines are usually reserved, speaking with a wry wit to encourage those who are discouraged and about to quit struggling against the terrors that threaten. It is often long after the fact that we realise how we were blessed to have stood in the presence of great women and great men.

Edith Girard was a quiet heroine. I don’t mean that she never spoke; I do mean that she lived her life with dignity and courage. Fighting a terrible, relentless foe, her world shrunk to the few rooms in her modest home, her throne a recliner in front of her laptop and her window into life a big screen television. These latter items gave her the ability to look outward onto a world that was no longer readily accessible. If she left the confines of her home, it was because Aime tenderly carried her to his truck and escorted her to some event. Her time away from the oxygenator’s umbilical cord was of necessity brief; and then she was forced to return.

At last Edith grew weary—who among us would not have been exhausted by the relentless foe that was robbing her of strength and life? On my last extended visit with Edith, I encouraged her to place her membership in the congregation. “What’s the point?” she asked abruptly. I spoke of the encouragement she was to others and of the teaching of Scripture. She then threw another curve, questioning her faith. I had never heard Edith express such doubts. As we talked, it became apparent that her weariness was speaking; she had a marvellous testimony of God’s grace. While but a child, Edith had placed her faith in the Risen Son of God; she was certain that God had received her; but weariness created questions with which she grappled. Somewhat as was true when John the Baptist, in his exhaustion had sent to ask of the One whom he had proclaimed, “Are you the One who is to come, or shall we look for another” [LUKE 7:20]? So, our sister struggled with the deep questions of why God allows His saints to suffer.

As we talked that particular afternoon, I began thinking of Peter’s words, little realising that I would be referring to them so soon. Those who did not visit with Edith in those final days may not have realised the magnitude of her struggles. Physically, the disease that ravaged her lungs left her exhausted. Emotionally, the toll grew, sapping confidence. Eventually, the physical and emotional toll exacted a spiritual toll, and our sister sought comfort through confirmation that God loved her. That comfort is found only through the Word of the Lord.

Perhaps you have asked precisely such a question. Why should someone who has faith in the Son of God struggle? And why should someone who has walked in the presence of the Son of God be compelled to grapple with such deep questions as this life draws to a conclusion. Peter asks the question,

“If the righteous is scarcely saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”

He is challenging his readers to consider the difficulties of life lived to the glory of God. You see, the Christian life is not a life free of trials or testing. Sometimes those trials drain the saint's energy, leaving her exhausted and unable to continue in her own strength.

In light of the Apostle's query, each one sharing the service must be challenged to determine how he or she is prepared to answer Peter's question. If a righteous woman struggles for assurance that God loves her despite seizing the promises of God, what shall one say that has only religion? One who attends church as a duty, or who attends worship when it is convenient, how shall that person answer the question. For it is certain that we shall each face the True and Living God. It is not a question of "if"; it is a question of "when."

I am fully aware that Peter is speaking specifically about the pain that accompanies opposition and assault because one is a Christian; however, the context is sufficiently broad to include the struggles of those who believe. In the broadest sense, we ask, "Why must believers struggle when a loving God has given them life and the promise of an eternal home?" While I could never tell you why one who is a Christian suffers, I am fully persuaded that we do know what God is doing when His child suffers, for God has told us.

As Peter opens this particular letter, he is writing to believers who are experiencing severe pressures. Listen to what he writes. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls" [1 PETER 1:3-9].

Focus on what Peter says is God's present activity for His own people. Those who are believers have been born from above; and this new birth is to a living hope. The believer does not have a "hope so" salvation; the child of God has a "know so" life. The Risen Saviour has now provided "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven" for those who are redeemed. At this time, the child of God is "being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed." Small wonder, then, that the one who is known by Jesus Christ rejoices. All this, God is now doing for the believer in Jesus Christ.

The dark side, at least from the perspective of those who focus solely on this dying world, is that "now for a little while" the child of God may well be "grieved by various trials." God is not capricious, however, for even in the trials of life—trials which are common to all who share in this fallen life—God is at work. The trials we experience, including progressive health issues, reveal the "genuineness of your faith"; and that faith is "more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire." No wonder this results in praise, glory and honour to the Master.

I do not deny that the trial Edith faced was severe. What I do say is that through her trial, the grace with which she bore the dreadful disease evoked an undeniable evidence of love for the Saviour in her life. Peter boldly states of those who experience trials, "Though you do not now see [Christ Jesus], you believe in Him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

The great problem of our present world is that we want to be spared all pain, all suffering, all trials, imagining that somehow in the midst of the wealth garnered from this dying world we will glorify God through ease of life. Such is not a likely condition. The Apostle to the Gentiles has written of the trials we face, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees” [ROMANS 8:18-24]?

Trials and struggles create a desire for Christ’s presence. Wrestling against the relentless invader that stole her strength and her energy, Edith turned her mind steadily to the love of the Saviour. At one point, writing in the Letter to Roman Christians, Paul boldly speaks of the situation for believers. Listen as I read ROMANS 8:1-11. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

“You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.”

On the basis of Edith’s testimony and according to the promise of God, I am confident that holy angels escorted our sister into the presence of the Saviour with whom she had long walked. Thus, Aime, Lisa and Neal were compelled to say “Good night” to a beloved wife and mother. For the Christian, there shall be no good-byes; rather we say to our fellow believers, “Good night; I’ll see you in the morning.” And that brings us back to the question Peter asked,

“If the righteous is scarcely saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”

As you consider the trials Edith faced, the testing she endured, the struggle as she wondered about the Lord’s severe mercy, how shall you at last face death?

If you have never been born from above, if you do not have faith in the Son of God, today becomes your opportunity to say “Good-bye” to a friend or to a family member. You shall not see Edith again, for you have no hope in the Risen Christ. However, if you share in this holy Faith, today is a sad day, but one in which sorrow is tempered with hope. For we who are believers are saying, “Good night.”

We who share this holy Faith have received this divine promise. “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words” [1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18].

Encourage one another, indeed. And if you haven’t this hope, what do you have? Amen.