

*Perpetua and Her Companions*

Where in the Bible does it say, “Cleanliness is next to godliness?” The Bible does not say that, but many people think it does. So where in the Bible do we find, “When God closes one door he opens another?” Again, the Bible never says that either. And where do we find “God won’t give you more than you can handle?” Actually, that also is not from the Bible, although people frequently misquote 1 Corinthians 10:13 that way. That passage, which we heard a few moments ago, really reads, “No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.” To illustrate what that promise from God means for us, let me share with you the true story of Saints Perpetua and Felicity and their companions.

Perpetua was born to an upper class Roman family in the year 180 A.D. Her mother was a Christian, but her father was a pagan. When she was just 22 years old, Perpetua was already a widow with an infant son. At that time Perpetua was taking classes, catechism classes, to be baptized and become a Christian. Studying along with her was her servant girl, named Felicity, who happened to be eight-months pregnant herself. The Roman Emperor had recently decreed that no one could convert to Christianity. Whomever did would be put to death. When Perpetua’s father found out she was becoming a Christian, he forbid her to do so, and then he beat her when she refused to give up her faith. After that beating, Perpetua, Felicity, their teacher, and some other catechism students were arrested and put in prison.

Imagine yourself in Perpetua or Felicity’s situation: being young, with so much of life ahead of you; and having a baby or being pregnant, and feeling all the normal maternal responsibilities toward that child; then being thrown into prison, for simply being a Christian; and then, being threatened with death, and the preferred method of capital

punishment for that crime was being torn apart by wild animals. That certainly seems to approach for me the “more than you can handle” level. That certainly seems like a testing that no one could endure. What kind of way out, what kind of escape plan might God have had for them? What God had in store for them may surprise us. It’s probably not what we would think.

In the prison, Perpetua’s father begged her again to renounce her faith, as did the pagan judge, out of sympathy for her. But again she steadfastly refused. While in prison, Perpetua talked about her love of Christ and she brought many people to the Christian faith. The judge had no choice but to sentence her and her companions to death. When the sentence was handed down, Perpetua and her friends didn’t whine or complain, they rejoiced and thanked God. They prized faithfulness to Christ more than life itself. They would rather die than sin.

Felicity had a concern, though. Being pregnant, Roman law forbid her from being executed. Even to the pagans, to kill an unborn child was considered spilling innocent, sacred blood. Wanting to die with her friends, she prayed that she might give birth before the day scheduled for the execution. Her prayer was answered; she did give birth just two days before. A Christian family adopted the baby.

Perpetua, Felicity, and their companions were sent into the arena to face the wild beasts. Several animals, including a leopard, were unleashed on the men of the group, and a rabid heifer was let loose on Perpetua and Felicity. Somehow they survived that. Moved by Perpetua and her friends’ courage, and in empathy for their situation, the usually bloodthirsty crowd uncharacteristically cried out for the prisoners to be given a merciful death. So the Romans slit their throats instead. Perpetua and her friends all died that day. That’s not the ending of the story we might have wanted. We might have preferred that God had arranged for them a miraculous jailbreak the night before their execution; or that

he might have given them supernatural powers to kill the wild beasts and pole vault out of the arena to safety; or that he just would have simple beamed them up into heaven. But God doesn't always choose to work that way. In fact, God rarely chooses to work that way.

The Christian church has a great tradition of remembering those people of God who lived lives of extraordinary faithfulness. Especially we commemorate those who gave their very lives as a witness to Christ. Usually these saints are celebrated annually on the day they were martyred (although remembering saints' days has generally fallen out of use in the modern Protestant churches). Today, March 7, 2010, just happens to be exactly the one-thousand, eight-hundred and eighth anniversary of Saints Perpetua, Felicity, and their three companions dying in the Roman arena for Jesus' sake. We know the exact date, and we know the story is true, because Perpetua herself wrote the story. Or, more accurately, Perpetua started writing the story, and an eyewitness finished it after her death.

There are many times in life when we feel we our problems are overwhelming, that they are more than we can handle. I talk to people all the time who feel that they have more troubles than they can take. Does that mean God is not faithful to his promise? Has God not been true to his word? No! God will not let us be tested beyond our strength. With every testing we are given the means to endure. Sometimes we might be given a literal way out, an actual escape. But in the absence of an escape, we will be given the strength to "keep keeping on," the strength to endure. That is God's promise and His promise is sure. We need not surrender to evil; we need not capitulate to sin; we do not have to turn our backs on God because God is faithful. He will not let us down in our moment of need. All who call upon Him will be saved.

If you worship here frequently you have may have heard me speak about a contemporary Christian hero, a Lutheran pastor named Richard Wurmbrand. He spent fourteen years in

Communist prisons, much of it in solitary confinement. He suffered grotesque tortures and he was forced to do things no human being should ever be made to do. Yet God granted that he should survive and live to tell the story of the modern day saints and martyrs. However, there were many Christian pastors and underground church members who could not emotionally and spiritually withstand the same kind of imprisonment and tortures that Wurmbrand did. They denied their faith and implicated their fellow Christians. What do you think about them? Do we condemn them? How dare we judge them -- we who have lived such pampered bourgeois lives? What right do we have to judge those who were beaten, starved, drugged, and humiliated in so many ways? Do we think we could do any better than them? I doubt it.

There were also those who could not physically survive the imprisonment and torture; they died. What of them? Was God not faithful to them? No! Perhaps they are the greatest saints of all, those who made the supreme sacrifice. Those chosen, and those who choose, to suffer and die like our Lord Jesus should be regarded with the utmost respect. They are not losers but victors. As I also often say, "Failure is not fatal, and even death is not final." Those who die in Christ, those who die witnessing to him, have a special honor. There is a great reward for them in heaven.

The "Hymn of the Day" today is an old favorite, *Rock of Ages*. Maybe that hymn has been so popular for so long because so many people can relate to the idea of hiding ourselves in Christ. We who have been so sorely abused and tossed about by life can appreciate the universal longing to just throw ourselves on Christ's mercy and know the peace and comfort only he can give. Sometimes that comfort comes in this life. Sometimes that peace only comes when our "eyelids close in death. But then we will "soar to worlds unknown" and "see Thee on Thy judgment throne." That's what we're looking for. That's where our faith is taking us. That's what it's all about. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.