

From the Pulpit of the Japanese Baptist Church of North Texas
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Firm In the Faith

1 Peter 5:8-11

5:8 Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

5:9 Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.

5:10 And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

5:11 To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

1. Approaching Persecution

The persecution against Christians by Emperor Nero happened immediately after Peter had written the First Letter, Nero was a Roman emperor in 14 years, from 54 to 68 AD. When Paul was arrested and judged in Jerusalem, he appealed to the court in Rome, saying “I appeal to Caesar.” (Acts 25:11) Nero was the Caesar (Roman Emperor) at that moment. Nero was a good emperor only in his early years. He killed his political opponents and drove good and clever people to suicide. As the result, the empire became chaotic. People talked each other that Nero had ordered to set a fire for burning the city of Rome when it was burnt in 64 AD. He said, “Christians did it.” and began to persecute Christians. He became the

first emperor who persecuted Christians.

Tacitus, a Roman historian, wrote about the persecution in detail. Though it will be lengthy, I'd like to read some paragraphs from his book, *Annales*, XV. 44. Because the readers of the First Letter of Peter met the persecution soon, and both of Peter and Paul became martyrs during the persecution.

“But all the endeavor of men, all the emperor’s largesses and the propitiations of the gods, did not suffice to allay the scandal or banish the belief that the fire had been ordered. And so, to get rid of the rumor, Nero set up as the culprits and punished with the utmost refinement of cruelty a class hated for their abominations, who are commonly called Christians.”

“Christ, from whom their names derived, was executed at the hands of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius.”

“Accordingly, arrest was first made of those who confessed to being Christian; then, on their evidence, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much on the charge of arson as because of hatred of the human race. Besides being put to death they were made to serve as objects of amusement; they were clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, others set on fire to serve to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open his grounds for the display, and was putting on a show in the circus, where he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or drove about in his chariot.”

“All this gave rise to a feeling of pity, even towards men whose guilt merited the most exemplary punishment; for it was felt that they were being destroyed not for the public good but to gratify the cruelty

of an individual.”

Tacitus criticized Nero. He also hated Christians calling them “a class hated for their abominations” and “those who hatred of the human race”. This kind of criticism against Christians were totally misunderstanding, but Christians became the target of people’s hatred because of such a prejudice. 1 Peter 5:8 reads, “Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” People brought a group of Christians to a stadium and let lions attack them, and enjoy to watch it as a show. Christians were actually attacked by real lions in the time of persecution.

The readers of this letter would face the persecution soon. Therefore, Peter encouraged them to prepare themselves for the persecution, sufferings, and the fight of faith, giving two instructions. The first one is “being sober-minded; be watchful”(verse 8) and the second one is “resisting the devil, and being firm in faith.”(verse 9) Today, let us learn about these two instructions.

2. Be Watchful

Let’s look at verse 8. It says, “Be sober-minded; be watchful”. “Be watchful” — This was what the Lord Jesus told repeatedly to his disciples. In Matthew 24 and 25, “Be watchful” was repeated three times. “Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”(Matthew 24:42) “But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.”(Matthew 24:43) “ “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”(Matthew 25:13)

Lord Jesus was in a sweat of blood in Gethsemane and prayed, “And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”(Matthew 26:39) He said to Peter, Jacob, and John, “Watch with me.”(Matthew 26:38) However, Jesus saw these three disciples sleeping after his prayer. Lord Jesus said to Peter, “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.” (Matthew 26:41) Peter must be ashamed when he heard this from Jesus. Peter had never forgotten this during his lifetime. This maybe why Peter taught “be sober minded, be watchful” to the fellow Christians before the persecution. You can not sleep spiritually when the time of dangers are approaching to you. In this circumstance, it is necessary to say “be sober minded, be watchful” and need to have watchful life.

However, I think that “being sober minded and watchful” is actually needed for the peaceful and safe time rather than the dangerous time. When you feel danger approaching to you, you pay attention to what you are doing and be cautious seriously. However, you could be relaxed, lazy, and do careless activity when you feel safe.

The literal meaning of “being sober minded and watchful” is that we don’t be drunk, and live cautiously.” Lord Jesus mentioned about Noah’s flood in the teaching of the end of the world. In Matthew 24:38, it says, “For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.” In additional, regarding to the parable of good and bad servant, he said,

“But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards,...”(Matthew 24:48-49) In both verses, the people were drunk because they felt safe. When you are drunk, your sense of judgment is not working properly. You are not responsible for what you are saying and doing. Even you can not walk straight. In such conditions, you can not think, understand, and follow the Word of God. It is impossible to fight and win in the battle of faith. We shall not be relaxed and lazy but be watchful when we feel safe and when everything goes well.

3. Firm In the Faith

Well, the second message in today's reading is “Resist him, firm in your faith”(verse 9). What does “resist” mean? Does it mean to resist politically or using military force to Roman government? At that time, there were many Christians in Rome and some were socially strong. Therefore, Christians could have stood against Emperor Nero by working with those prominent people. But even if they did, persecutions could still have continued. So, Christians did not take such an action but instead, they were engaged in non-violent resistance. When they were forced to abandon their faith to Christ and to worship Roman gods and emperor, they kept religious resistance and confessed that Jesus was their Lord. The word “resist” that the Bible uses refers to “never give up a confession of faith”.

The Bible does not say “resist evil” but it says “resist devil”. If it was only against evil, Christians would have taken weapons. They would have resisted nation's or social evil. But the enemy of

Christians was not “evil”, but the “devil”. This is the spiritual war, as Ephesians 6:12 says “war against spiritual forces”. This spiritual war cannot win by human power. The only way to win this war is by “faith”. That’s why the Bible teaches us to “Resist him, firm in your faith”

Then, what kind of faith is it? Verse 10 says “after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.” This is the faith in believing and trusting that God, filled with grace, will protect those in Christ until the end. In the former and latter part of verse 10, there are two opposing words, “eternal glory” and “suffer a little while”. This means that a suffering on earth is just temporal and a glory in heaven is eternal.

The believers have their own wars and sufferings because of their faith. Those who are trying to be faithful to God have their own sufferings, tears and fights, that others cannot understand. But these sufferings are just temporarily compared to eternal glory in heaven. Apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:1 “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.” Those believers who endured sufferings and fought the fight of faith had a firm faith that God who saved them would protect them and support them until the day of return to heaven.

To keep faith is not easy, as God had invited believers from the bottom of sins to the highest in heaven. That is “Upward Way”. The way that believers take is not the same as that of non-believers. It may be a flat way, but it cannot be a path which is not connected to heaven. Furthermore, it cannot be a downhill way that brings them down to

where they were with sins. The upward way comes with sufferings. That's why you might give up growing in faith, or being disappointed because of unfruitful outreach mission, or abandoning service to God on the half way. Spiritual war or the fight of faith is to resist temptations and to believe that God will heal, strengthen, encourage and make us firm, and to place hope and trust in God. Our God is "the God of all grace", filled with grace. We would like to remember His steadfast grace and faithfulness, and walk up a path to heaven.

(Prayer)

Dear God of all grace, we thank you that you taught us what was important for us to live this time, in the spiritual war, the fight of faith and our life. Please make us awake and strong because we often fall into sleep in the peaceful time. Please make us remember that the victory of this war is in Jesus Christ, and make us stand firm in the faith and fight the fight in Him. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.