

“THRIVING AMIDST PERSECUTION”

Psalm 100, 121, I Peter 2:11-25, 4:12-19

Fountain Park GMC

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“Greg Asimakoupoulos tells of a commuter flight of the Eastern Express Airlines from Portland, Maine, to Boston, Massachusetts, on September 4, 1987. The pilot, Henry Dempsey, heard an unusual noise near the rear of the small, 15 passenger aircraft. He turned the controls over to his co-pilot and went back to investigate.

“As he reached the tail section of the empty aircraft, the plane hit an air pocket, and Dempsey was tossed against the rear door. He quickly discovered the source of the mysterious noise. The rear door had not been properly latched prior to takeoff, and it flew open upon him hitting it. He was instantly sucked out of the jet.

“The co-pilot, seeing the red light that indicated an open door, radioed the nearest airport, requesting permission to make an emergency landing. He reported that the pilot had fallen out of the airplane, and he requested a helicopter search of that area of the ocean.

“After the plane landed, they found Henry Dempsey; he was holding onto the tail-door ladder of the aircraft. As he was being sucked out of the airplane, he had caught the ladder, held on for ten minutes as the plane flew 190 mph at an altitude of 4,000 feet, and then, at landing, kept his head from hitting the runway. His face was only 12 inches from the tarmac. It took airport personnel several minutes to pry Dempsey’s fingers from the ladder.

“Things in life may feel turbulent,’ said Asimakoupoulos,’ and you may not feel like holding on. But have you considered the alternatives?’”¹

Friends, I want to encourage you today, as we are also in precarious times. We may feel like we’re at 4,000 feet, hanging on for dear life, going 200 miles an hour, but we don’t need to fear, if only we’ll keep hanging on to our faith in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Trials will come to us that will cause us to really consider if it is worthwhile to hang on to Jesus.

¹ (Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000] pg. 614)

Persecution has been a part of our lives for the last four years, and it's been a tough process of disaffiliation from the UMC. Those of us who have held on tightly to the teachings of the Bible have become the target of scathing rebukes, harsh criticisms, and outright lies. But we've done our best to hold on to the Way, the Truth and the Life through Jesus Christ. Yet, as the persecution continues to come after us from outside the church, we need to hold on tenaciously to our faith, and never let go of the promises of our Savior, Jesus.

So I'm here to today to ENCOURAGE YOU to stay true to your faith, and to INVITE you to keep hanging on with all your heart, soul, mind and strength to the Lord of life and the Savior of all who will turn to Him.

Psalm 100 tells us to *"Shout for joy to the Lord...worship the Lord with gladness...and know that the Lord is God"* (100:1-3). We are to *"enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise; [we are to] give thanks to Him and praise His name"* (100:4).

That's a far cry from what we would really want to do when we're being persecuted, isn't it. It's human nature to want to grouch, and complain, and strike back, and make those who persecute us feel what we're feeling. It's only natural to want to cry out, "Unfair!" But that's not what Psalm 100 tells us to do. No, we are to rejoice in the Lord, focus on Him, and hang on to our faith with all our might. We are to be joyful because we are being deemed worthy of receiving punishment for daring to follow Jesus' teachings and keeping true to the commandments in the Bible. That is to be seen as an honor, my friends!

You see, we have the promise of the Lord that He will be with us every step of our way when we make Him our Savior and Lord. And Psalm 121 reminds us, *"I lift up my eyes to the mountains - where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip...The Lord watches over you - the Lord is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor will the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all harm - He will watch over your life..."* (121:1-3a, 5-7).

Do you know what that means? It means no matter what comes upon us, no matter what we are forced to face, we are to keep our eyes focused upon Jesus so that He can carry us through the times of trouble so that we might remain faithful to Him and keep doing His work of taking Salvation to the world! Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is not meant to be without hardships and trials. Though that would be nice, it is the trials and troubles that keep us turning back to Jesus for His help and guidance so that we can thrive during the persecution. When the Lord is on our side, when we remain faithful to Him, what do we have to fear? I would rather be persecuted and ridiculed and criticized for doing the right thing than to be lifted up and celebrated for doing the wrong thing!

Jesus told His disciples to expect persecutions and trials. He told them:

“...they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of My name. And so you will bear testimony to Me. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of Me. But not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm, and you will win life” (Luke 21:12-19).

Persecution is not something we should be surprised about. At the end times, there will be a great division between the faithful and the faithless. There will be a separation between those who call on the Name of the Lord Jesus and diligently seek to follow Him, and those who call themselves followers of Jesus, but do not do what He says. There will be a drawing of sides - those who are for the Lord, and those who are for the world. And we are to make our own choice of which side we will be on.

But this is not to be with heavy hearts, or with anxious souls. We are to be joyful and exuberant because Jesus is calling us to be faithful so that we can witness the difference that He makes when we trust in Him, draw near to Him and stay faithful to all of His Word. We are to follow the examples of the disciples of Jesus in the Bible, who were willing to be arrested, tortured, maliciously maligned, and threatened with death. If it happened to Jesus and His 12 disciples, why not it happen to those who remain faithful to Him in our world today?

You see folks, there is a spiritual war going on right now, and the world is trying to eradicate faithfulness to Jesus by whatever means, and at any cost. Should we be scared about what the world might do to us? **NO!** There are people in the world who are looking at Christianity, and they're this close [] to turning their lives over to Jesus, but they want to make sure that what they're going to give their life to is worthwhile. They are looking at those of us who call ourselves Christians to see if what we say, matches up with what we do. They're watching how we respond to attacks on our faith. They're watching how we deal with those who get in our faces and shout profanities at us for daring to follow the Bible's teachings. They're even pushing us to see what we'll do in extreme cases of persecution to see if having Jesus in their life is going to be beneficial for them if they make the choice to receive Him and follow Him as their own Savior. They want to see what real Christianity is about. So we have to persevere in our faith so that those around us can really see Jesus through us.

With that in mind, the apostle Peter invites us to live such outstanding lives that even those who *"accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us"* (I Pet. 2:12). He even goes so far as to say that we respect and honor all those who are over us to the point that we might lead them away from their path toward destruction, and guide them toward the light of Christ instead. We can't do that if we're retaliating against them, or mouthing back at them, or complaining against them. Our part is to live blamelessly so that everyone can see our Christ-like character and desire what we have - the hope of Salvation through Christ Jesus our Lord.

Hear the words Peter gives to encourage those undergoing persecution. This is I Peter 4:12-19. (READ I Peter 4:12-19) *"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For*

it is time for judgment to begin with God's household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good" (I Peter 4:12-19).

Did you get that? "Praise God that you bear the name of Jesus" and "continue to do good." Hold onto your faith! The world desperately needs to see your faithful witness. Be pleased that you are counted as worthy to receive such persecution because you are demonstrating the goodness of God. You are living witnesses to the Truth of Jesus Christ. Don't be ashamed of that, but boldly continue to live in a way that honors the sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf so that we could have life through Him. Remember, if we were not doing anything for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Satan would be leaving us alone. But because we dare stand out for Jesus, that puts us right in the face of Satan and He desires to destroy us in any way possible. He wants to destroy our faith. Don't let him do it - hold onto your faith!

Consider the words of a father who was trying to get his son not to quit so easily. He said, "Son, you've got to hang in there and not quit. Look at Abraham Lincoln. He did not quit. It took him many tries to become the president of the United States. Look at Thomas Edison. He did not quit. It took him over 2000 tries to get the correct filament for the incandescent light bulb. Look at Douglas MacArthur. He did not quit. He kept pushing in World War II to bring freedom to those in the South Pacific area.'

"Then he said, 'Look at Elmo McCringles.'

"The son said, 'Wait a minute, Dad. Who is Elmo McCringles?'

"The father said, 'What? You've never heard of Elmo McCringles? See. He quit.'

"Don't throw in the towel when the going gets tough."² Keep your faith in Jesus and allow Him to use you, even in your persecution, to be a witness to the love of God. Do not give up being a follower of Jesus Christ. Live in a way that proclaims His Way, His Truth and His Live.

² (Tony Evans, *Tony Evans' Book of Illustrations*, [Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009] pg. 222, #676)

You see, “God works so hard to get His people’s attention. Even when man is at his worst, God does not forsake him. In fact, it is frequently during times of spiritual crisis that God shows His power most dramatically.”³

But what does it mean for us to thrive amidst persecution? When persecutions come to us they force us to reevaluate ourselves. They force us to look deep within us to see what we might be doing wrong and what we are doing right. They force us to look at the things we do, the things we say, the people we hang out with, and consider the aspirations we have, not only as individuals, but also as an organization.

For each one of us, we are invited to evaluate how deeply we believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior. Is He the center of our hearts, or are there other things that are more precious to us than Jesus? Are we diligently seeking to know Him more, or are we letting others tell us what we think we need to know about Him? Do we know Jesus in a personal relationship, or do we know just enough about Jesus to get us into trouble? Are we adamantly searching the Scriptures to see how God really wants us to live, or are we letting the world tells us what is right and what is wrong? Are we daily living in a way that proclaims Jesus is Lord of our life, or are we living how we want to live instead? Are we promoting the love of Jesus by the way that we treat others, or are we really a disgrace to Him by the way our words and actions are put forth toward others? Are we organizing our lives to follow all His commands, or do we only know a few things of what Jesus has commanded? Are we using the resources that God has given to us to promote life for others who are less blessed than we are, or are we using them for ourselves only? Are we spending more time watching TV or video games or recorded movies than we are reading and pondering God’s Word in the Bible? You see, when persecutions come to us for being a follower of Jesus, these are important questions to ask of ourselves.

Thriving amidst persecution means that we are growing in our relationship with Jesus every day so that all we say and all we do reflect His love and His care for those us and all of those around us.

³ (F. LaGard Smith, *The Daily Bible*, [Eugene, Or: Harvest House Publishers, 1984] pg. 724)

Thriving means not merely surviving, but putting effort and energy into making our lives count for Jesus. Thriving as a church means that we take the time and energy necessary to blossom abundantly for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

If we as a congregation want to thrive as we go through these final days of the disaffiliation process, what kinds of things do we need to start doing? What kind of things do we need to give up on and let go? Who do we need to begin to reach out to? How can we use the resources we have here at this church to let the whole world know that we stand strong on the firm foundation of Scriptural holiness according to the Bible's teachings?

You see, we are at the start of a brand new denomination, the Global Methodist Church. We have so much to look forward to as we seek to follow the guidelines of the Lord our God. The world is diagnostically looking at us to see what we are planning to do as a new denomination. Will we retaliate against the UMC? Will we berate them or treat them with disdain and contempt? Will we make a point of letting everyone know what we stand against? Or will we simply let the world know that we are adamantly seeking to follow the ways of the Lord? Thriving demands that we keep the joy of the Lord in our hearts and give the world a look at how we praise the Lord our God for being an awesome God.

So how we go on from this point will determine what many will do. If we hope to grow as a new denomination, we need to stay true to our faith in Jesus, and live in honor and praise to God. We need to continue to treat each other with respect and dignity - believer or non-believer - regardless of race, nationality, skin color or gender, so that we have the opportunity to shine the light of Jesus Christ in all that we say and do. We need to have the love of Jesus within us so deeply that we radiate that love to all those who enter here into this place, as well as to everyone who we might meet on a daily basis. We've got to let the joy of the Lord be our strength!

That is the way that we will thrive, even in the midst of persecution. We've got to live for Jesus,

hold on to Him with all our might, and keep showing His love to all those around us so that they might see Jesus in and through us. That will be the determining point in the life of this congregation, as well as the life of the Christian Church.

Let's pray. Father, thank You for being an awesome and loving God. Thank You for the work You have already done on our behalf through Jesus Christ our Lord! Thank You for Your strength and wisdom through Your Holy Spirit! Thank You for brothers and sisters in Christ to encourage and support each other.

Father, it is so hard to have to endure persecution, especially from those within the Church. Thank You for the endurance given to us to hold on to Your Truth, so that we might live as witnesses to our world of the difference Jesus makes in us as we hold on to Him and follow His commands. Thank You for Your promise to always be with us, so that no matter what comes before us, we might sing and shout praise and glory to Your Holy Name. Remind us daily of Your love for each of us so that we might show that same love to all those around us.

Now, as we begin this new venture as Global Methodists, enable us to carefully evaluate our lives to look at our future, to see if we might be true to our faith in Jesus. If we have things that should not be happening, things that need to be ended in our lives, expose them to us so that we might make the necessary changes. If there are things that we need to start doing, reveal them to us, too, so that we might step out in faith to do Your work.

Father, enable us to boldly proclaim the message of Salvation to everyone, so that they might find life and hope in Jesus Christ our Savior. Give us Your joy that we might thrive during difficult days and draw many others to know You. This we pray, to Your glory, and through the powerful Name of Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.