

“Left Behind”

John 17:6-19

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An elderly woman was lying on her deathbed. Her daughter was holding her hand and comforting her. The daughter noticed that her mother had begun praying and was touched by it. Suddenly, the mother opened her eyes and asked the daughter, “Do you think God forgives us of our sins?” “Yes, Mother,” she quickly replied. “Are you sure He forgives all our sins?” the mother inquired. Her daughter reassured her, “Why sure, mother. I know He forgives all our mistakes. Besides, what have you done for which you need forgiveness?” “That,” her mother replied, “is none of your business!”

Evidently Jesus felt his final prayer before the crucifixion was our business. I am grateful that he shared it with his disciples and the Johannine community preserved it for us.

What was on Jesus’ mind hours before he died? It is safe to say that the well being and safety of his disciples that would be left behind occupied a lot of his thoughts. This reveals how much he loved them. They were dear friends, gifts from God, and he was proud of them.

The work he was leaving them to do was also on Jesus’ mind. His mission was complete; theirs was not. As important as the disciples were to him during his earthly ministry, Jesus knew they would be even more vital after he was gone. Faithfulness in the midst of strong temptation and stiff challenges would be crucial.

So what did Jesus do? He prayed for them, asking his Father to protect them from evil and keep them united. It was what Jesus refused to ask God to do that I find intriguing. “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one” John 17:15.

Jesus knew their lives and work would be challenging, but this was no reason to pray for their release from heavy responsibilities. It was, however, the time to pray their faith would be increased.

This speaks to me. Let me share my thoughts with you.

It is in the most challenging situations that our faith is needed. Adversity and temptation quickly remind us of our limitations, which confront us with choices. We can deny our limitations and plunge ahead to certain defeat. We can run away from our challenges and live in fear with shame and guilt. On the other hand, we can reach out to God and others and tap into a reservoir of strength that enables us to accomplish more than we thought possible.

I appreciate Barclay’s insight into this verse. “Jesus never prayed that his disciples might find escape. He prayed that they might find victory. Christianity was never meant to withdraw a person from life. It was meant to equip him or her better for life.”

I agree wholeheartedly. When life is bigger than we are, we must look to One that is bigger than life. Humble prayer can connect us to One that provides the wisdom, courage, patience, determination and guidance we need to confront and tackle temptations and problems. Jesus knew that God had not left him or his disciples to live on their own strength, but that out of His grace He would equip them to be loyal disciples. He will do the same for us, too.

It is in the most challenging situations that our faith is strengthened. Faith is like a muscle; the more it is used the stronger it gets.

Did you see the first press conference hosted by Tony Snow, President Bush’s new Press Secretary? He handled the usual array of questions about gas prices, immigration, the economy and the Iraq war. At one point in the conference Snow was asked a personal question about the “LIVESTRONG” bracelet he was wearing and became emotional as he answered. Snow, who had his colon removed last year and underwent six months of chemotherapy after being diagnosed with colon cancer, struggled with his response for forty-five seconds. Choking up, Snow joked about it being his “Ed Muskie moment.” Muskie, a Maine senator that ran for president in 1972, choked up while complaining about unsavory media reports about his wife.

“I had cancer last year,” Snow began. “It’s going to sound stupid and I’ll be personal here. Having gone through this last year was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

How could he possibly say such a thing? In an interview later, I heard Snow expound on that comment. He talked about how that ordeal reminded him of what is really important: faith, family and his opportunity to make the world better. This stiff challenge certainly strengthened his faith. I pray your challenges are doing the same for you.

It is in the most challenging situations that our faith is revealed and shared. Our text raises a question that must be addressed. Why didn’t Jesus ask the Father to take his disciples out of the world? If he was leaving, why didn’t he take them with him? If he truly loved them, why would he leave them behind? I think there were two reasons. The world needed them and he had confidence in them.

Deena Burnette is the widow of Tom Burnette, Jr., one of the passengers on Flight 93. Tom was the first passenger to reach a family member on his cell phone after the plane had been hijacked and diverted to our nation’s capitol on September 11, 2001. It was Deena that alerted the authorities to this crisis.

When asked how this tragedy had changed her life, Deena responded, “It has allowed me to share Tom’s faith and mine with people I would have never met. It has opened doors of opportunity I would have never dreamed possible.” This has to be one reason Jesus wanted his disciples to remain after he was gone. Their challenges, like Deena’s would allow them to share their faith in word and deed.

The world needed to see their faith and the difference it was making in their lives. The Lord needed his disciples to model new ways of thinking, living, arranging priorities, relating to others, handling problems, responding to temptation and reacting to enemies. Their mission was the same as Jesus’ and that was to reveal God’s healing grace to a broken world. Their calling was to love and care for creation, be charitable to all people and spread God’s word. This was to be done at all times and places, even under intense stress and pressure.

Jesus had confidence in them and believed they would not become intoxicated by or addicted to the things of the world, becoming distracted from their mission. He believed they would not shirk their responsibilities out of fear or intimidation. Instead, he felt deep in his heart that they would be, with God’s help, as dedicated and consecrated to building the Kingdom of God as he was. As a matter of fact, Jesus was willing to risk everything upon their loyalty.

I understand why the Johannine community insisted that this prayer be included in the gospel. The early believers were going through difficult times and wishing for ways to escape. No doubt they were crying out for deliverance when what they needed God to provide was wisdom, strength, courage and determination. They needed to be reminded of Jesus’ confidence in them to remain close to one another and faithful to the God whom he addressed as Father.

This morning, you may be in a difficult situation from which you would like to escape. You dream about being liberated and placed in a new environment with different opportunities. Perhaps you have voiced a desire to dissolve your marriage or have wished for a different job, school to be over, a new place to live or an illness to be cured.

Have you thought that you may be exactly where God wants you to be or at least needs you to remain? Perhaps He needs you to stay where you are so you can bear influence upon those around you? He needs you to model new ways of living and thinking, being an agent of change that brings hope and healing to those around you.

If you left where you are now, who would suffer the most? Whose dream for a better life would vanish with you?

Perhaps you need to reconsider what you are wishing for and praying. Instead of asking God to rescue you, ask Him to reveal why He has placed you where you are and the difference you can make. Ask Him for wisdom, grace, strength, courage and determination. While you are petitioning God, I hope you catch a glimpse of Jesus who is doing what he does best, praying on your behalf.