

STANDING MY GROUND, I ENDURE FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOSPEL

Endurance is a word that denotes inner strength of faith. Faith in itself is abstract, seen only in action. We cannot touch it, but we fight our spiritual battles with its shield. "Take your share of the hardships and suffering as a good soldier of Messiah YAHSHUA" (II Tim. 2:3), was the counsel that Paul gave Timothy, his young missionary partner and spiritual son. When Paul wrote this letter to Timothy, he was imprisoned in Rome (A.D.66-67). However, nothing stopped him from exercising his confidence in the faith that he professed and taught. In those days when men were considered as gods, there was no tolerance for anyone who believed otherwise. Those were evil and dark days, when only the strong in faith overcame them. In those days, the message of the Gospel given by the apostles of YAHSHUA emanated strength through the letters written to the churches. They were the only source of spiritual knowledge to the New Testament churches. Paul wrote most of the letters that comprise the books of the New Testament. He, when a pharisee, persecuted and took part in the death of Christians, believing that he held the truth. With the same zeal, Paul stood strong for the sake of the Gospel, when he had an encounter with the Savior, YAHSHUA on the road to Damascus with the purpose to bind with chains those of the faith in YAHSHUA. We read in Acts 9:1-2 the following: *Meanwhile, Saul, still drawing his breath hard from threatening and murderous desire against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and requested of him letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any men or women belonging to the Way he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.* In his zeal, nothing stood in the way of his evil purpose against Christians of those days. He used the authority of a pharisee to wipe out the testimony of YAHSHUA, until YAHSHUA appeared to him, convicting him in a bright light that blinded him for several days.

When Paul fell to the ground, he heard a voice saying, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? And Saul said, Who are You, Lord? And He said, I am YAHSHUA, Whom you are persecuting. Trembling and astonished, he asked, Lord, what do You desire me to do? The Lord said to him, Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do (Acts 9:4-6). From the time on, his name was changed to Paul. He became a warrior for the cause of the Gospel; no longer a prosecutor of it. He endured many hardships until his death as a martyr. Never giving up, never looking back, when circumstances turned against him. He taught the concept of the armor of God, for he well knew what the spiritual warfare was about. He said, "Therefore, put on God's complete armor, that you may be able to resist and stand your ground on the evil day, and having done all, to stand [firmly in your place]" (Eph. 6:13). The Apostle Paul was no ordinary man, but whatever former position, he had, he considered as rubbish for the sake to serve God through persecution and hardships. He said, "To this hour, we have gone both hungry and thirsty; we wear but one undergarment [and shiver in the cold]; we are roughly knocked about and wander around homeless; we still toil unto weariness [for our living], working hard with our own hands. When men revile us, we bless them, when we are persecuted, we take it patiently and endure it... we have been made and are now the rubbish and filth of the world." (I Cor. 4:11-13); "we are hedged in on every side, but not cramped or crushed; we suffer embarrassments and are perplexed and unable to find a way out, but not driven to despair; we are pursued, but not deserted; we are

struck down to the ground, but never struck out and destroyed; always carrying about in the body the liability and exposure to the same putting to death that the Lord YAHSHUA suffered, so that the life of YAHSHUA, also may be shown forth by and in our bodies, for we who live are constantly being handed over to death for YAHSHUA'S sake..." (II Cor. 3:8-12). Today, Christians in many parts of the world are still suffering persecution to their death, without giving up their faith. However, the western hemisphere knows very little what it is to be persecuted. Because we have immature and frail faith, depending very much on tangible things, when we should be walking by faith, not by sight (II Cor. 5:7); therefore, we are unprepared for the coming storm of persecution.

The secret of Paul's spiritual success was the fact that he did not get discouraged, or became faint with weariness and exhaustion, because he had renounced disgraceful ways; he refused to deal craftily or to adulterate or handle dishonestly the Word of God; but he stated the truth openly and so he commended himself in the sight and presence of God to every man's conscience (II Cor. 4:1-2) (paraphrased). Paul considered that the light and momentary affliction was ever more and more abundantly preparing and producing and achieving for him an everlasting weight of glory! Since he considered and looked not to the things that are unseen; for the things that are visible were temporal, but the things that are invisible were deathless and everlasting (II Cor. 4:17) (paraphrased). The Apostle Paul is the example of what a born-again Christian ought to be, for in spite of been beaten with countless stripes, and frequently [at the point of] death; in spite of receiving five times from the hands of the Jews forty [lashes all] but one; three times he had been beaten with rods; once stoned, three times, been aboard a ship wrecked at sea; a [whole] night and a day spending [adrift] on the deep; many times on journeys [been exposed to] perils from rivers, perils from bandits, perils from [his own] nation, perils from Gentiles, perils in the city, perils in the desert places, perils in the sea, perils from those posing as believers; in toil and hardship, watching often in hunger and thirst, frequently driven to fasting by want, in cold and exposure and lack of clothing... (II Cor. 11:23-28) Paul endured all without wavering. Whom of us, who is called ministers of God, could compete with the life of Paul today? No one, with exception of those who are being persecuted and killed. Forgetting all for the sake of the Gospel, Paul lived his life as one who never lost focus of God's purpose for His calling. Amidst his sufferings, he continued encouraging the churches to be consistent in the work of the Lord, saying, *Therefore, my beloved brethren, be firm, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing and being continually aware that your labor in the Lord is not futile (I Cor. 15:58) and fight the good fight of the faith; lay hold of the eternal life to which you were summoned and [for which] you confessed the good confession before many witnesses (I Tim.6:12).* At the end of his life, knowing that he was going to be offered as a sacrifice by way of his death, he declared: *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith; henceforth, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge will award to me and recompense me on that day- and not to me only, but also to all those who have loved and yearned for and welcomed His appearing (II Tim.4:7.8.).*

Endurance in suffering for the sake of the Gospel does have an eternal reward. If you are suffering as a consequence of sin in your life, repent and make things right with God. He is ever willing to forgive you. But if you are suffering unjustly for your faith, remember that the weight of glory you will experience, is greater than all you have suffered here in this world. With feet shod, let's hold

our battle ground; with the shield of our faith let's protect ourselves against the temptations of the devil, keeping connected with God by prayer and supplications. The war has already been won by our Savior, Who loved us and gave Himself for us. Let's fight the good fight of faith with perseverance and endurance, always holding our ground, for He Who promised us the victory is faithful!