



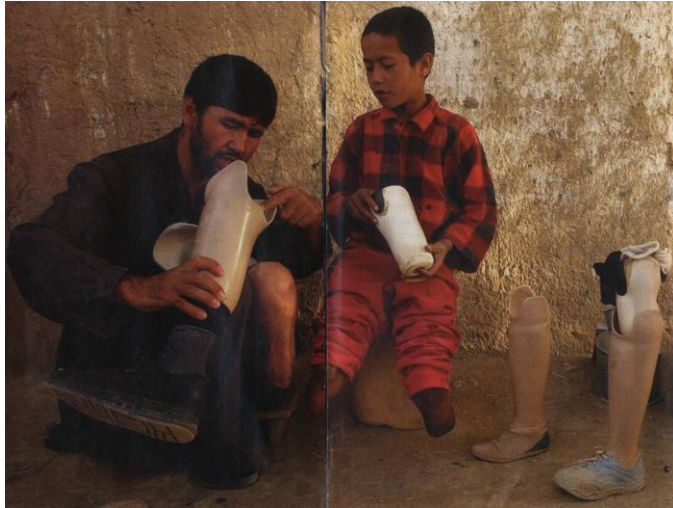
²⁶ For ^dif we go on sinning deliberately ^eafter receiving the knowledge of the truth, ^fthere no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ ^gbut a fearful expectation of judgment, and ^ha fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. ²⁸ ⁱAnyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy ^jon the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one ^kwho has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned ^lthe blood of the covenant ^mby which he was sanctified, and has ⁿoutraged the Spirit of grace? ³⁰ For we know him who said, ^o“Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, ^p“The Lord will judge his people.” ³¹ ^qIt is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

³² But recall the former days when, after ^ryou were enlightened, you endured ^sa hard struggle with sufferings, ³³ sometimes being ^tpublicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. ³⁴ For ^uyou had compassion on those in prison, and ^vyou joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had ^wa better possession and an abiding one. ³⁵ Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has ^xa great reward. ³⁶ For ^yyou have need of endurance, so that ^zwhen you have done the will of God you may ^areceive what is promised. ³⁷ For,

^b“Yet a little while,
and ^cthe coming one will come and will not delay;
³⁸ ^dbut my righteous one shall live by faith,
and if he shrinks back,
my soul has no pleasure in him.”

³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

Martin Luther King Jr. is best known for his “I Have a Dream” speech but I think his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” is even better than his famous speech. If you haven’t read it, I highly recommend that you do some time. This past week I encountered a letter written from another jail half way around the world. We could call it *Letter from Kabul Jail*, for it was written from a cold, filthy prison cell in Kabul, Afghanistan by this man, Sayed Musa.



Sayed was raised as a strict Muslim who never once heard about Jesus until he was forty years old. World Magazine details the account of his conversion.

Who are these women? Musa asked a neighbor. "They are Christians, followers of Jesus Christ," was the reply. "That was the first time I heard the name of Jesus Christ," said Musa. "I saw that they were really good people, and I thought I should find who Jesus Christ is." Musa met other Christians while working for the ICRC.

"I could not dare to ask but finally I did: 'What is a Christian? Do you have a book?'" he said to one, eventually receiving a Bible and an offer to answer his questions.

Reading it on his own, he said, "I realized this is the word of God. I did not find any difficulty in the Bible, but the Quran for me is difficult. It's in Arabic and I don't speak Arabic. Two thousand years ago Jesus spoke, but for me everything became new." Several weeks later, Musa and his wife were baptized.¹

He held a small church service in his home and was eventually arrested and placed in a jail cell in the city of Kabul. His captors encouraged the other prisoners to beat Sayed, which they did without mercy. Here is an excerpt of the letter he wrote from that prison cell (complete with his broken English).

I'm agree with long perison about my faith even for long life. Because I'm the sinest person in the world. Because sometime they treated for died I refuse my faith to died. Sometimes I tolerate the persecuted: but emediat... I acknowledge my sin before Lord Jesus Christ: Don't refuse me before your holy angels and before your father. Because I am very very weak and sinest man.²

I first read about Sayed when I saw this blog post back in February. “Pray for Sayed Musa: Afghan Christian Set to be Hanged within Days?”³ This was the time of his imprisonment when he thought his execution could happen at any moment. When officials told him he would be hanged in three days unless he converted back to Islam, he asked them to be sure to hang him publicly. "I don't care if they crucify me upside down...my spirit will still be alive. I am only afraid of God. Only he can send my soul to hell."⁴

This is precisely what he wrote in his letter from prison. "I am also agree with died on cross of my pride. I also agree with the sacrifice my life in the public. I will tell the faith in Lord Jesus Christ son of God. And other belivers will took courage and be strong to their faith. hundred percent I am stable to my word."⁵

While all of this was going on, his wife and six children were forced to leave their home and take refuge in Pakistan because their landlord kicked them out of their home and they were constantly threatened by neighbors. Thankfully Sayed was released from prison and has rejoined his family at an undisclosed location in a country where they will have to learn a new language and customs.

I share Sayed's story because I think it is an almost perfect living illustration of this morning's text in Hebrews. Sayed joyfully accepted all of the suffering that was given to him for two reasons: he had a holy fear of the Lord and he patiently anticipated a better and lasting possession.

Compared to Sayed's life of suffering, for us, life is filled with many blessings. I trust that over the Thanksgiving holiday you have been able to literally count those blessings one by one. We have been keeping a Thanksgiving journal since 1995 and as you can imagine, some of the entries from the kids are quite humorous. Here is Ryan's list from when he was seven.

LEGO
GPAKrS

Here's one from Kellyn at age four.

KAt
FAMILY
TOYS

And Kellyn again at age nine.

Jessica doll
MOM
DAD
Ethan
Ryan
Brownie
God
Jesus

I hope that list wasn't in order of priority because the Jessica doll is seven spots higher than Jesus!

The Thanksgiving entry that most concerns me has to be Ryan's from 2004. "I am so thank ful for Bush being re elected."

In this free and prosperous nation in which we live and especially living under the saving grace of Jesus Christ, we truly have innumerable blessings. However, each of us endure losses of all

kinds. Some of you have lost some income or benefits in the past year. Others have lost their job altogether. Some have lost loved ones. I am sure many of you have lost investment income. Some feel like they may be losing their children. Some have lost the respect of co-workers or family members. Some have lost a portion of their health or full mobility. Still others have lost close relationships. Each of endures losses with every passing year, but not all of us accept these losses with joy like Sayed has done. Let me walk you through this passage so we can learn what this young believer has earned through the fires of suffering.

He has a holy fear of the Lord. Verses 26-31 describe why we should all have this holy fear. ²⁶ *For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,* ²⁷ *but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.* Some say that the Biblical descriptions of hell are merely symbolic, that is to say, there won't actually be flames eternally consuming people. But since Jesus and other Biblical authors like this one routinely use flames and fire to describe the reality of hell, just what does this symbol represent? Typically the actual thing is worse than the symbol, so it doesn't do much good to downplay these descriptions of hell. And this description is particularly pointed—this fire will “consume the adversaries.”

For those who struggle with the doctrine of hell this passage reminds us why it is deserved. The enemies of God are actively engaged in the following.

How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has

1. spurned the Son of God
2. profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified
3. outraged the Spirit of grace?

The average unbeliever would probably deny that this is what they are doing but their objections are futile. God is infinitely holy and good and to reject his infinite love is worthy of infinite punishment.

Sayed did not spurn the Son of God or profane his name but trusted in Jesus' death and resurrection for his salvation. He did not have a fear of the flames of hell but he did have a right and holy fear when he said, “I am only afraid of God. Only he can send my soul to hell.” This is a clear allusion to Luke 12 where Jesus said, “I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. ⁵ But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!” I think this was Sayed's way of saying that he was not afraid to die, that he did not have a fear man or what men could do to him. He was punched, kicked, spat upon and raped in prison but through all of that he knew that the worst man could do to him was take his life. This is a proper view of suffering which flows out of a proper view of God.

This also reflects perfectly on verse 31: *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.* We should have perfect confidence and boldness to approach the throne of grace with any sin and any sorrow, but this confidence must always include a holy fear of God. If we fail to understand the terror of eternal consumption in the flames of hell, then it is obvious that we have failed to grasp the blood of the covenant and Christ's sacrifice for us. Until you fully realize what you were saved from you will never fully bask in the glory and thankfulness of your salvation.

Moreover, even though you may not spurn the Son of God or profane his blood, you can cheapen his grace. We cheapen God's grace when we view God's grace as easy. This is a difficult and delicate balance to be sure. I have told you many times that we can presume upon God's grace. His grace is so plentiful and so lavish that we can always have confidence that it will be supplied. But while we presume upon his grace we must never assume that it is not costly. Have you ever noticed that when you offer a free service that people tend to take it for granted but if you charge a small fee they place more value on it? This is part of the dilemma of grace—it is free, but it is not cheap. It is free, but its value is eternal. Run to the throne of grace with boldness but do not take it for granted.

I think this is the sense in which Sayed is living his life when he twice said, "I am the sinest man in the world." Does that remind you of anything in the Bible? This is what Paul said in 1 Tim 1:15. *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.* If Paul had been raised in Afghanistan and spoke broken English, he would have written, "I am the sinest man in the world." This is a proper holy fear of the Lord. We don't have to fear going to hell but we should fear the one who could have rightly sent us there.

Sayed not only had a holy fear of the Lord but he also patiently waited for a better and lasting possession. Let me read the next few verses and you tell if this doesn't sound like Sayed's life. ³² *But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings,* ³³ *sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.* ³⁴ *For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.*

There is another thing that the readers of this letter and Sayed had in common. In 12:3 we read, *In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.* The author of Hebrews knew that the people he was writing to had undergone severe persecution and suffering. He knew that many had been in prison and the others had cared for those in prison. But none of them had yet been martyred. They had not resisted to the point of shedding their blood—of being killed for their faith in Christ. Of course by this time there had been countless martyrs in Jerusalem and other cities, but none of the author's readers had shared in their martyrdom. In the same way, Sayed was spared from execution and had not yet resisted to the point of shedding his blood. He was prepared to do so but he was also grateful that the Lord had spared him.

This perfectly matches the words of Jesus from Luke 6. ²² *"Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man!"* ²³ *Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.*

The key to Jesus' words is that you are hated and reviled "on account of the Son of Man". There are all kinds of reasons someone might get mad at you and most of the have nothing to do with living for Jesus. You might just be a jerk at times. You may have made a knuckle-headed decision and someone is mad at you as a result. This is a good test for your own life. If someone

is angry with you, stop and ask yourself if they are angry on account of the Son of Man. Are they angry because of your decision to live a life of righteousness? Now be careful here because all of will want to say that this is the case. “Oh, yeah, my wife got mad at me the other day because of my righteous lifestyle.” Sure she did. It had nothing to do with the fact that you hunted all day and watched football all night. ☺

But without a doubt the key to accepting loss with joy is the end of verse 34—*since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one*. The other day someone asked me how many pennies I have in a jar in my kitchen. The rough estimate is about 13,000. With so many pennies, if I lost 100 or so, I wouldn’t miss them a bit. Actually, I wouldn’t miss all 13,000 of them for that matter. Let’s say I own five houses and one burned down. I wouldn’t mind so much because I still had four. This analogy just begins to touch upon the notion of a better and abiding possession. It doesn’t matter what I give up in this life because what awaits me is so much better. If my earthly possessions are plundered because I am faithful to the Lord, I should be able to joyfully accept this fact. If someone takes away my freedom because I preach the gospel, I should be able to joyfully accept this fact.

Our earthly possessions, including our health and even our lives are the opposite of this description—better and abiding. What we have now is temporary and of lesser value. If we did not have a better and abiding possession awaiting us, then we should grieve, wail and mourn with every loss. If this is all there is—if this really is as good as it gets, then we should be pitied above all people, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15. But since our inheritance is better and abiding—and those two descriptive words are immensely important—than we can accept loss in this life with joy.

What if you were holding a twenty dollar bill and I asked you to let go of it and hand it over to me? Depending on what you thought I needed it for, you may or may not be willing to do so. But what if I asked you to hand over that twenty in exchange for a new car? Of course you would “let go” of the twenty dollars to get something much better. In an infinitely greater sense, when we endure loss in this life we can know that we have a better and abiding possession.

Most of us have heard the old saying, “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” This old wisdom represents a conservative view of life which says that it is much safer to hold onto the one small thing you have instead of risking it for something twice the value that you don’t yet have. Those two birds in the bush are not yet mine. If I let go of the one that is in my hand and try to catch the two birds in the bush, I may fail and end up with nothing. But in God’s economy, this conventional wisdom is literally flipped on its head. For the believer, the two birds in the bush are a not a risky endeavor but rather a promise guaranteed by the one for whom it is not possible to break a promise.

Since we have this rock solid promise, the author encourages us to persevere. *Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.*³⁶ *For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.* The author is telling us that we have our promise and what we need in the meantime is endurance. We have laid hold of our better and abiding possession but we need patience to get through the next day. We need endurance to accept loss with joy.

And this is where men like Sayed Mussa can serve to push us towards perseverance. He gave up his home in Afghanistan. He gave up all of his earthly possessions. He gave up his family not knowing if he would ever see them again. He faced the almost certain reality of giving up his life. And in the end, he gave up his country that he loved to move to a safer, but unknown country. Let me leave you with four ways that Sayed's life can be an encouragement for us.

Pray for Sayed and his family. When we learn about and pray for people like him we are reminded again what endurance looks like.

Model your patience and endurance after him. Most of our small losses are nothing compared to his. But as he endured, he also repeatedly asked for people to pray for him and to help him. Don't attempt to persevere alone. It will not work. Listen to how Sayed finished his letter from prison. "This is a request from to all over the world people please help with me. For sake Lord Jesus Christ. Please pray and immediately help with me and rescue me form this jail. Otherwise, they will kill me..." he was ready to die but he did not want to die. He asked for help and so should we.

If we are not persecuted or enduring loss at the moment, have compassion for those who are. Hebrews 13:3 reminds us to *remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them*. A true heart of compassion allows us to feel the pain of the person who is suffering. All through this passage and all through the Bible, suffering is never viewed as something that is without pain. God never promises that it will be easy but he does promise the availability of

Finally, we should be prepared to follow in his footsteps. Persecution like Sayed has endured it not a question of *if* it happens, but *when*.

Sayed has suffered the loss of everything except his life and the lives of his family. Now that he is released, he says, "Life is really good. I have my family, they are OK, and it was all the plan of God."⁶

Rich Maurer
November 27, 2011

^d Num. 15:30; Deut. 17:12

^e ch. 6:4; 2 Pet. 2:20, 21

^f [ch. 6:6; 1 John 5:16]

^g ch. 2:3; 12:25

^h Ps. 79:5; Isa. 26:11; Zeph. 1:18; 3:8; [Ezek. 36:5; Zech. 8:2]; See 2 Thess. 1:8

ⁱ Deut. 17:2-6

^j See Num. 35:30

^k [ch. 6:6]

^l ch. 13:20; Zech. 9:11

^m ch. 9:13, 14

ⁿ [Matt. 12:31, 32; Eph. 4:30]

^o Rom. 12:19; Cited from Deut. 32:35

^p Ps. 50:4; 135:14; Cited from Deut. 32:36

^q Isa. 33:14; Luke 12:5

^r ch. 6:4

^s See Phil. 1:30

^t 1 Cor. 4:9 (Gk.)

^u [ch. 13:3; Matt. 25:36; 2 Tim. 1:16]

^v See Matt. 5:12

^w 1 Pet. 1:4

^x ch. 2:2; 11:26

^y ch. 12:1–7; Luke 21:19; Rom. 2:7; 12:12; See Matt. 10:22

^z ch. 13:21; [1 John 2:17]

^a ch. 11:39

^b Isa. 26:20; Hag. 2:6; Luke 18:8

^c Cited from Hab. 2:3, 4

^d Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11

¹ World, Holding Fast, November 19, 2011, Volume 26, Number 23, pp. 50-55.

² World, Holding Fast, November 19, 2011, Volume 26, Number 23, pp. 50-55.

³ <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2011/02/23/pray-for-sayed-musa-afghan-christian-set-to-be-changed-within-days/>

⁴ World, Holding Fast, November 19, 2011, Volume 26, Number 23, pp. 50-55.

⁵ <http://www.persecution.org/2010/11/16/afghan-imprisoned-for-christian-faith/>

⁶ World, Holding Fast, November 19, 2011, Volume 26, Number 23, pp. 50-55.