

Last week, I was listening to Vision FM, and they were interviewing this bloke from the RICE movement (Renewal & Inter-Church Evangelism), and he'd gone on a tour with "Open Doors", into some of the areas of the Middle East, where Christians are being severely persecuted by ISIS.

And this is the story he told:

Today I met a hero

Although he wanted me to, I will not show you his face or his name because his statements are too provocative. My faith is so conditioned to be risk adverse that I double checked "Aren't you afraid for saying these things?" He laughs and says "Afraid? I am not afraid! They can try to hurt me but they can't take away what is most precious. My Jesus lives in my heart and they can't take Him"

This man was rich. When I say rich I mean he owned 3 houses, multiple cars, and 1km worth of undeveloped land. He managed an office of multiple staff, which he ran with an Islamic man who was his best friend.

When ISIS swept through his town to cleanse it of Christians he picked up his wife and 5 kids and fled for fear of their lives. As they ran his best friend phoned and took pleasure in telling him;

"I have taken everything of yours. I have taken your house. I am actually calling you from inside your house which is now mine in the name of ISIS."

*My friend replies “I **will** come back one day!” Only to hear this chilling reply “No, I will chase you to the next town to which you run now, and we will take everything again”.*

The betrayal and emotional hurt added to fear for physical safety makes what ISIS do so pervasively sinister.

Yet my hero friend continues: “They come in the name of ISIS but we will stand firm in the name of Jesus Christ and we will not be afraid of them. We leave our houses, but I know that if we leave our faith we lose everything.”

I asked him “What will you do if you see you ex-best friend again?” He smiles and says “I will love him and I will leave him alone because my Lord teaches me to do that.”

But nothing could have prepared me next, for what I believe is a truly prophetic message to the western church.

“Before they took away everything I was a Christian only by name, but now my faith is alive. ISIS is a gift. If ISIS comes to the west it is a gift from the Lord. It will be ‘a wake up call’ for a sleepy church. If you want to spend your time working for more money and more houses and just going along to church on Sundays you can lose it, but if you work for God (he points upwards), you can never lose it. So I say to the western church “Wake up. Wake up!”

I was cut to the heart when he concluded with this assessment of us: “Christians in the West don’t want to die because they are more in love with life than Jesus.”

This statements rocked me. Not because I was offended, but because deep down I know it is true of me.

And it’s not like he couldn’t leave. He recently got offered a visa to escape to the Czech Republic with his family but he refused it because he says “It is God’s will for me to be here. When you are a small child in the womb of your mother God already has a plan for you. He has a reason why you are alive and why you are created. God is working here and He wants me to stay.”

He says, “The most important thing in life is passing the message of Jesus to more and more people and since ISIS has come, more Islamic people than ever are asking us about our faith. It is so amazing when they come and say, “Tell me about this Jesus”

Clasping hands and sharing a holy kiss (middle eastern style) in this photo is hopefully just a symbol for what I pledge to continue to do. To tell their stories, to stand with my family, to love & learn from the persecuted church, to wake up and to love Jesus more than my life.

Today I met a hero. But he is only being like his Hero. Both of us have met that one. His name is Jesus. But perhaps only one of us really looks like him. And it’s not me.

“If anyone were to follow me he should deny himself, pick up his cross and follow me”¹¹

Friends, that testimony, encapsulates the essence of today's reading.

Last week, Paul told us one of the most wonderful truths, of the Gospel message. We have been justified by faith, in Jesus Christ.

And if we have been justified by faith, well that means, through Jesus Christ, we live in peace, between God and us. Now, peace is not merely "an absence of hostilities" – peace is a tangible relationship of peace – of well-being, between God and us. It's something which is born out of God's love **for** us.

We **were** once enemies of God, because we were against him. We **were** godless, and we **were** corrupted by all sorts of sin. We **were** objects of God's wrath, and we **were** bound for judgment... But through Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross, and our faith in Him, that has all changed. We **now** live in peace. – We **now** have this wonderful relationship of peace – Peace, with the God who loves us.

Now, Peace is wonderful, but that's not all there is – there's more. We also "**stand**" in a state of grace.

What that means is, we are no longer desperately struggling, trying to be good enough, to stay at peace with God... We stand, in grace.... We are saved **by** grace, and we stand "**in**" grace...

Through Christ, we are now living in a different realm. We used to be living under "law", and under the "wrath of God",

and we were caught up in judgment... But now we're living under a different realm – the realm of grace.

By faith, we now stand, in a state of grace.

Everything has changed. And when everything has changed, nothing stays the same.

So guess what??? There's more.

We are justified by faith. And so, through Jesus Christ our Lord:

- we have peace with God.
- And we stand in grace...

But there's more...

We boast (or rejoice) in hope of the glory of God...

Most of our modern versions of the Bible, translate it as “rejoice” in the hope of the glory of God... And some of us might go “Yeah, I do that privately”.

Perhaps a better word, is “boast” – but it's a joyful boasting. And it's not a boasting about ourselves – in fact, we've got **nothing** to boast about... And so, it's a public rejoicing in what Christ has done for us – it's a public rejoicing in this gracious gift – this new hope that we have. Hope of the glory of God.

What does that mean? Does that mean that I hope that maybe God might be shining and glorious???? No, that falls so far short of the hope we have.

This life is short. God sort of set the age we should live, somewhere around 3 score years and ten (70)... Well, I did the maths the other day, and I'm 2/3 of the way there... Life is short.

But our hope isn't constricted to this life. Our hope is opened up to the vastness of all eternity, and the majesty of the Glory of God, and His transforming power.

I get so frustrated, with the way that I am now... Not just physically (I mean, I'm a bit fat, and I'm not the fittest person in the world)... No... I'm talking spiritually. I'm not the sort of person I want to be. I have failed to be, what God wants me to be... Do you feel like that???

But a hope in “the glory of God” is a joyful confidence, that despite my current failures, the *state of “God-like-ness” which has been lost because of sin, ... will be restored in the last day to every Christianⁱⁱ.*

The “Hope of the glory of God”, is a *joyful confidence, that overcomes this frustration we have (at our present failure to be all that God would want us to be). And this hope, is a gift, that should mark every believer.*

Alright, so this is a bargain – it's adding up isn't it...
Because we're justified by faith:

- We are at peace with God
- **And**, we stand in grace – a new realm – a new paradigm in which we live

- **And**, we are joyfully confident in the hope of the glory of God (we're not going to get 'stuck' as our old selves) – He's going to transform us to make us like Him...

But wait!! There's even more!! And no, it's not a set of steak knives... We **also** boast or rejoice in our sufferings...

What the??? Why??

Because suffering produces endurance.

Alright, fair enough, endurance is a good thing, but why would we rejoice at that??? "Yahoo!! Thanks!! I've got endurance, so I can keep suffering for longer!!!"... Oh, what a great prospect that would be...

Firstly, what kind of suffering are we talking about? Well, it can mean any sort of suffering – anything bad that's happening to us in this life – as we suffer through it, it produces endurance. And let's not 'downplay' the trauma of suffering (illness; affliction; grief; persecution; bullying; anxiety; bankruptcy)... Any of these kinds of suffering, can produce the endurance that Paul is talking about.

But I believe, it is especially talking about suffering for our faith in Jesus Christ.

Suffering produces Endurance.

Endurance produces character.

You've heard about the "University of hard knocks"... That's the university that produces character.

As we suffer, and as we endure suffering, it produces in us, the character of Christ. Jesus Christ came, as the suffering

servant. He endured the agony of the cross. And as we endure suffering – especially as we endure suffering in His Name, and **for** His Name’s sake, our character, is being transformed, to be like His character...

Did you see that in the story we began with? Old mate said that he used to just be a Christian **only by name**. But now, his faith is alive. When ISIS came along, and they suffered persecution, and he lost everything he had, all of a sudden he realised, the fullness of what it means to be saved by faith.

Maybe he used to know that he had “peace with God”. Maybe he used to know that he “stood in grace”... But that’s only half of what it means to be justified by faith. He wasn’t boasting in the hope of the glory of God. He wasn’t boasting in sufferings...

But once everything of this world was stripped from his grasp, he now knows what it is, to boast in hope of the glory of God, and to boast – to rejoice in his sufferings...

Did you notice that he didn’t just try and find some little thing to give thanks for, in the midst of his suffering??? He actually found a reason to give thanks “for” his suffering. And he **wished** that **we** in the west, could have an opportunity, to have a bit of that suffering too, to wake **us** up from **our** slumber...

Because he said something like “You lot love life, more than you love Jesus”... And that is so true, for many of us, who claim to be Christians.

So many of us, know what it’s like to have peace with God, and we know what it’s like to stand in grace, forgiven... But

fewer of us, joyfully look forward, to when the Glory of God, will transform us to be like Him. And even fewer of us, will boast (or rejoice) in our sufferings...

And so, when times of suffering come, this is God, doing a good work in us.

- Suffering produces endurance
- Endurance produces character
- Character produces hope

We've already talked about hope. What did 'Old mate' in the Middle East say?

"Afraid? I am not afraid! They can try to hurt me but they can't take away what is most precious. My Jesus lives in my heart and they can't take Him"

And then he said:

"They come in the name of ISIS but we will stand firm in the name of Jesus Christ and we will not be afraid of them. We leave our houses, but I know that if we leave our faith we lose everything."

What a hope...

Hope is not, simply fantasising that "Golly, I hope I get to go to heaven"... We're talking about a joyful confidence, because we **know**. It's a **sure** hope – a **certain** hope...

You know, the world will pooh-pooh this hope we have. They'll tell you, you're believing in myths and children's fairy-tales... They'll tell you it's all just 'pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die'...

And they will do the very best they can, to degrade you, and to shame you, ... But hope does not put us to shame...

How do we know this???

Because this whole thing – everything we’ve talked about this morning, is an expression of God’s unending love.

God’s love, has been poured into our hearts. He hasn’t just dribbled a little bit of his love in there – He’s **poured** it in – He’s **gushed** His love, into our hearts....

How do we know that?

Well, all we’ve got to do, is look at the cross, to know how much God loves us... But it doesn’t stop at the cross... Once we’ve been made right with God, He fills us with His Holy Spirit. He pours His Holy Spirit into us...

- We know we’re at peace with God, because His Spirit hasn’t left. His love hasn’t left us.

The confidence we have for the day of judgment is not based only on our intellectual recognition of the fact of God’s love, or even only on the demonstration of God’s love on the cross (although that is important; cf. vv. 6–8), but also on the inner, subjective certainty that God does love us.ⁱⁱⁱ

You know (inside of you, don’t you?), that God loves you?

- We stand in grace, because our God is a God of grace, and not only are we in Him, but He (and His

graciousness) are in us

- We boast in the hope of the glory of God, because He's already begun His transforming work in us now (through His Holy Spirit). You don't think the Holy Spirit wants to live in a hovel, do you? No. He's cleaning us up, and transforming us to be more like Him, even now.
- And we boast (or rejoice) in our sufferings, because no matter how much hate the world can direct towards us, the love of God, has so much more power...

The world **may** try to shame us, but when we know how much God loves us, "Who cares?"

Remember, God has poured His love, into your heart...

Did you see that coming through in the story????

Do you mind if I read that story again??? (and that's where we'll finish)

Today I met a hero

Although he wanted me to, I will not show you his face or his name because his statements are too provocative. My faith is so conditioned to be risk adverse that I double checked "Aren't you afraid for saying these things?" He laughs and says "Afraid? I am not afraid! They can try to hurt me but they can't take away what is most precious. My Jesus lives in my heart and they can't take Him"

This man was rich. When I say rich I mean he owned 3 houses, multiple cars, and 1km worth of undeveloped land. He managed an office of multiple staff which he ran with an Islamic man who was his best friend.

When ISIS swept through his town to cleanse it of Christians he picked up his wife and 5 kids and fled for fear of their lives. As they ran his best friend phoned and took pleasure in telling him;

“I have taken everything of yours. I have taken your house. I am actually calling you from inside your house which is now mine in the name of ISIS.”

My friend replies “I will come back one day!” Only to hear this chilling reply “No, I will chase you to the next town to which you run now and we will take everything again”.

The betrayal and emotional hurt added to fear for physical safety makes what ISIS do so pervasively sinister.

Yet my hero friend continues: “They come in the name of ISIS but we will stand firm in the name of Jesus Christ and we will not be afraid of them. We leave our houses, but I know that if we leave our faith we lose everything.”

I asked him “What will you do if you see you ex-best friend again?” He smiles and says “I will love him and I will leave him alone because my Lord teaches me to do that.”

But nothing could have prepared me next for what I believe is a truly prophetic message to the western church.

“Before they took away everything I was a Christian only by name but now my faith is alive. ISIS is a gift. If ISIS comes to the west it is a gift from the Lord. It will be ‘a wake up call’ for a sleepy church. If you want to spend your time working for more money and more houses and just going along to church on Sundays you can lose it, but if you work for God (he points upwards), you can never lose it. So I say to the western church “Wake up. Wake up!””

I was cut to the heart when he concluded with this assessment of us: “Christians in the West don’t want to die because they are more in love with life than Jesus.”

This statements rocked me not because I was offended but because deep down I know it is true of me.

And it’s not like he couldn’t leave. He recently got offered a visa to escape to the Czech Republic with his family but he refused it because he says “It is God’s will for me to be here. When you are a small child in the womb of your mother God already has a plan for you. He has a reason why you are alive and why you are created. God is working here and He wants me to stay.”

He says, “The most important thing in life is passing the message of Jesus to more and more people and since ISIS has come more Islamic people than ever are asking us about our faith. It is so amazing when they come and say “Tell me about this Jesus”

Clasping hands and sharing a holy kiss (middle eastern style) in this photo is hopefully just a symbol for what I pledge to continue to do. To tell their stories, to stand with my family, to love & learn from the persecuted church, to wake up and to love Jesus more than my life.

Today I met a hero. But he is only being like his Hero. Both of us have met that one. His name is Jesus. But perhaps only one of us really looks like him. And it's not me.

“If anyone were to follow me he should deny himself, pick up his cross and follow me”^{iv}

ⁱ <https://www.facebook.com/stevechong/posts/10153562627410887>

ⁱⁱ Moo, D.J., 1996. *The Epistle to the Romans*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

ⁱⁱⁱ Moo, D.J., 1996. *The Epistle to the Romans*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

^{iv} <https://www.facebook.com/stevechong/posts/10153562627410887>