

Faith amid Our Trials

By **William L. Saunders**

November 10, 2019 – Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: 2 Maccabees 7.1-2, 9-14; 2 Thessalonians 2.16-3.5; Luke 20.27-38

What would you do if you found yourself suddenly enslaved? What if someone snatched you off the street, from the arms of your family? Someone who came at you suddenly, unexpectedly?

I imagine you would be frightened and bewildered. You would wonder, what is going on? What has happened? Imagine, if you can, how much worse you would feel if your kidnapper had a gun and threatened you with it, telling you that he would kill you if you made a sound. Anyone would be terrified in such circumstances.

Certainly, we hope that never happens to us or to our loved ones. But it has happened to many people, all over the world. It has happened in foreign lands, yes, but also in America. It has happened in the past, yes, but it still happens today. Facing a captor seething with hatred, armed with a deadly weapon, our very lives may be on the line – “say this” or “don’t say that,” “otherwise you will be killed.”

Dire Choices

Second Maccabees addresses such a terrible situation. There the brothers and their mother were taken prisoner by the servants of the king and threatened with death. Their only way out was to do something they knew was wrong, something they were convinced the Lord God had admonished them *not* to do. They faced a stark, clear choice: deny God and commit a mortal sin, or refuse and be killed.

Do you ever wonder what you would do in such circumstances? I often imagine I would stand firm and die a “hero’s death.” But would I really? Particularly if my mother stood before me, threatened with death if I didn’t yield? We are all weak creatures, and many of us would doubtlessly yield to such cruel and inhuman threats.

Of course, most of us will never face that choice in such terrifying circumstances. However, though it may seem hard to believe, all of us *will* face equally dire choices, though the circumstances will likely be mundane (and that mundaneness may fool us; at least the brothers in Maccabees knew their lives were at stake!).

In fact, every time we are tempted to violate the commandments of Our Lord, we are facing a similar dilemma: Shall I yield and, thereby, deny God? Will I separate myself from God for eternity for the sake of a passing fancy here on earth?

If we had to depend on our own human courage, most of us, probably all of us, would fail. We would not confidently face death as did the brothers in Maccabees.

How, in fact, were they able to do so? Because they trusted in God, they trusted that he would welcome them in Paradise, that he would raise them from the dead, if they were faithful. As one brother said to the servants of the king, “[y]ou . . . are depriving us of this present life, but the [true] King of the world will raise us up to live again forever. It is for his laws that we are dying.”

The Power of Faith

Often in scripture, you may have noticed, great saints ask *not* to be put to the test. They recognize the human weakness in each of us; left to our own resources, we will probably fail the test. Hence, there is nothing wrong in wishing and praying to be delivered from such trials. As Saint Paul says in 2 Thessalonians, “pray . . . that we may be delivered from perverse and wicked people.”

However, Saint Paul was as confident as were the brothers Maccabee that the Lord will stand by us if the trial comes: “He will strengthen you and guard you from the Evil One.” We may not be able to escape hard consequences in this world if we resist the Evil One and those who serve him, that is, if we hold steadfast in following the commandments of Our Lord. But Saint Paul assures us: “The Lord is faithful.” He will not leave us alone. The Holy Spirit will come to us and strengthen us in the time of trial.

Since we know temptations are coming that, if we yield, could rob us of a place in heaven, we must strengthen ourselves in advance by going to weekly mass and confession, by daily prayer and spiritual reading, by spending time with Lord in the tabernacle. Much as every athlete does, we must prepare ourselves for the contest that is coming. And we have the advantage of knowing that those who oppress us or tempt us act against the Truth of the universe.

Even so, without a living faith in the living God, the trial could prove too much for us. So, again, as Saint Paul urges, *pray* that you will be delivered from the trial; but if you must stand it, do so knowing that the Lord will give you the strength you need.

As I opened these reflections, I made oblique reference to a great saint who was kidnapped, threatened, tortured, and sold into slavery. Her name is Josephine Bakhita. The name “Bakhita” was given by her kidnappers, who took her one morning as she gathered water for her family and subsequently sold her as a slave in Sudan. The word “bakhita” means fortunate one. When, too terrified to speak, she could not tell the kidnappers her name, they cruelly named her “fortunate.” It was cruel because her circumstances were anything but fortunate – she was a young child facing a lifetime of slavery, subject to people who thought she was worth less than a domesticated animal and who gave her merciless whippings and threatened to kill her.

Yet, Bakhita believed in God. She found in her cruel circumstances a path to find God and to know him fully. Eventually, she was sold and taken to Italy. There she broke free of her captors, entered a convent, and became a great saint. In God’s providence, the cruel name meant by her captors to humiliate her instead became a fitting name. Bakhita herself said she was truly “fortunate” because her circumstances had enabled her to know the God “who I knew in the bush but whose name I knew not.”

This is the power of faith. That faith allowed Bakhita to withstand years in slavery. It enabled the brothers Maccabee to meet their deaths in confidence. It led Saint Paul to pray to avoid the trial but to face it without fear if it did come. This is the power of faith in a God who does not disappoint, who assures us that whatever may befall us in this life, we will be with him in Paradise.

The Great Paradox

The gospel today focuses our attention on fidelity to the law, as the divine Lawgiver himself, Jesus, gives it to us. But perhaps more deeply we might say it concerns faith and hope.

The Sadducees were those Jews who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. They asked Jesus about marriage in heaven in order to trick him into saying something that would offend ordinary people. But he refuted them. As the second person of the Trinity and hence as the true author of the scriptures, Jesus straightforwardly quoted the scriptures to the Sadducees – though Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have been dead for centuries, *they are alive*.

This is the great paradox, one might say, of the Christian faith: God is the God of the living, not of the dead. Those who believe in God will live again. They will die but not be dead. Just as Moses lives in heaven, so do the brothers Maccabee. Just as they live in heaven, so does Saint Paul. Just as Saint Paul does, so does Saint Bakhita.

On earth, in this life, we know two things. First, the trials, both physical and spiritual, will come. But, second, and more importantly, we know that if we have faith in God, we have a secure hope of heaven. We will be “deemed worthy to attain to the coming world and to the resurrection of the dead.” We will be “the children of God . . . because [we] are ones

who will rise” on the last day. Jesus Christ himself, the second person of the Trinity and our truest friend, tells us this. We will have trials in this world, but be of good cheer, for Jesus Christ has overcome the world.

Pray to be delivered from the wicked ones, but whenever your trial does come, have faith in the Lord, and you will overcome your trial. Whenever death does come, you can be secure that you will be with him in Paradise. Nothing the world may inflict upon us can keep us from the Lord, if only we have faith.

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For Further Reading

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church, [##988-1019](#)*
- *Steven D. Graydanus, [“Don’t Pray to Be Spared Hardship?”](#)*
- *Fr. Jeffrey F. Kirby, [“Josephine Bakhita Enters the Ranks of the Superstar Saints”](#)*
- *[“Resurrection of the Body”](#)*

In Short . . .

- *Every time we are tempted to violate the Lord’s commandments, we face a dilemma: Shall I yield and, thereby, deny God?*
- *If we had to depend on our own human courage, probably all of us would fail.*
- *We strengthen ourselves in advance of temptations by receiving the sacraments, by daily prayer and spiritual reading, by spending time with Lord in the tabernacle.*
- *As Saint Paul urges, pray that you will be delivered from the trial; but if you must stand it, do so knowing that the Lord will give you the strength you need.*
- *Those who believe in God will live again; they will die but not be dead.*
- *Nothing the world may inflict upon us can keep us from the Lord, if only we have faith.*