

“Fix Your Eyes on Jesus”

Grace, peace, and, mercy are yours from our God; Father, Son, and, Holy Spirit. Amen. I know some of you met my brother-in-law, Ken Clausen, before he passed away a year and a half ago. He was, to say the least, rather energetic. His idea of a great vacation was to get a National Forest topographic map, look for where the lines are closest together, indicating the steepest and most inaccessible areas and then figure out how to get there. I made the mistake of agreeing to go with him on one of his treks on one of our family vacations. You see, not only did Ken like to find out-of-the-way places, but because of his long legs he liked to find them quickly. After our hike that morning I was shot for the rest of the day. **But, I have to admit, what we saw was nothing short of magnificent.**

One summer when I was serving in South Dakota we decided to do something a little less intense. The **Mickelson trail** is a bike trail made on old train lines. We started north of Custer and rode approximately 11 or 12 miles into Hill City. Then we packed up the bikes and drove into the hills where we picked up the trail and rode into a little town called Mystic. It was a beautiful trip as we rode through a couple of **old train tunnels**, and it was particularly enjoyable because, up to that point, it was almost all downhill. After we got to Mystic we decided that the kids were pretty worn out so Ken and I volunteered to ride get the vehicles.

One of the problems about going downhill one way is that it isn't **downhill going back**. Ken and I started out and I thought I was doing pretty well but after a few miles I began to feel the day's travels. Ken was rather kind, stopping every couple of miles to wait for me to catch up. At that time, Ken was biking about 2000 miles a year in Boise, riding 20 miles roundtrip to work. I quickly figured out I'd never be able to keep up with him but I have to admit my ego was taking a bit of a bruising each time he had to stop and wait.

I finally told him to go on ahead and get his vehicle and head back to our families. I assured him that, no matter what it looked like, I wasn't going to have a heart attack or pass out on

the side of the trail. Then, after he left, I began slogging my way up the trail again.

My plan was to keep a steady, if not fast, pace and take a break at some check points I thought I'd remembered passing. This worked well but as I neared, what I thought was the end, I realized my checkpoints weren't as I had remembered them and the **trail kept going**. So I just kept pedaling along, trying to maintain an even pace. Of course, it didn't help my attitude much when my brother-in-law drove by in his vehicle on the road next to the trail and I began to wonder just how far ahead of me he had gotten.

I told myself to just keep riding, even if my legs, and other parts of my body, were burning and sore and promised myself that I'd take a break **at a curve** I could see up in the distance. I fixed my eyes on that curve and kept pedaling, looking forward to the treat of stopping and letting the blood flow back my "sitting down place."

As I pedaled and as my legs burned I kept thinking how easy it would be to simply stop and walk the rest of the way. But I kept my eyes on the curve and kept on pedaling. I reached the curve and was just about to stop when, as I looked beyond the curve, I saw the last gate and my vehicle. Just seeing the end in sight gave me a burst of energy and the desire to keep going so I could stop, put the bike away, and not have to get on again.

I tell you this because I believe it illustrates our text very well. The writer to the Hebrews encourages us to "***fix our eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.***" As we go through life, things can come up which make us feel like we just can't go on. Sometimes it seems there's no end in sight. And it's in these times that God encourages us to "*fix our eyes on Jesus,*" that, in Him there is hope even in the trials and ultimately peace and joy to come.

This is especially appropriate today as we remember those who are suffering persecution simply because they bear Jesus' name. According to *Open Doors*, an organization which has tracked Christian persecution for the last 25 years, approximately **215 million Christians** are experiencing high, very high, or extreme persecution even as we sit here in comfort. These are brothers and sisters in Christ who suffer persecution in one form or another because they refuse

to deny Him who “*endured the cross*” for them. Believe it or not, more Christians gave their lives in the 20th century alone than the 19 centuries prior.

We take our religious freedom in the US for granted but in countries around the world religious freedom is only a dream. In **Iraq**, just about the only thing the Sunni, Shiites, and Kurds can agree on is their hatred for the Assyrians, Iraq’s indigenous Christian population. As a result, many members of what is probably the oldest Christian community in the world are leaving their ancient homeland. In **Egypt**, Coptic Christians, while quietly allowed to practice their faith, must overcome legalized harassment almost every step of the way. And it isn’t unusual for churches to be bombed on high church festivals as Christians gather in high numbers.

According to *Open Doors*, Islamic extremism remains the dominant driver of persecution, responsible for initiating oppression and conflict in 35 out of the 50 on the 2017 list of countries where systemic persecution exists. But persecution doesn’t only take place in Arab nations. For the last 14 years North Korea has been the most dangerous place to be a Christian.

And persecution by family members is also common. After a woman in Tajikistan became a Christian, her joy in her newfound faith was quickly challenged by her devout Muslim husband. When he found her Bible, she admitted that she brought it into their home, and that she had become a believer in Jesus Christ. Her husband beat her, destroyed the Bible, locked her inside their house, took her cell phone, and warned her that if she left the house, he would divorce her and leave her and their child on the street.

Or consider Shirajul, a man who lived in Bangladesh. After leading a service for his 26 member house church and spending the afternoon with other believers in a nearby village he left for his home and his wife and child. But he never made it. As he rode through a deserted spot between fields, he was knocked off his motorcycle by a homemade bomb and attacked by a group of men who stabbed him multiple times, killing him.

The man who first shared Jesus with Shirajul said, “He was the boldest leader. He was always talking about Jesus and salvation. Many times I told him, ‘Hey, brother, you should not

'talk here or there.' But he would say, 'No, it is my responsibility to speak. No problem.'

While no one has taken responsibility or been arrested for his murder, this man and Shirajul's wife, Hira, think he was probably killed by fundamentalists from his own village. But they are not concerned about bringing his murderers to justice. **"I am praying for [the murderers]," she said. "I have already forgiven the people who killed him."** And although she mourns the her husband's death and faces a difficult life without him, her focus is on expanding God's kingdom in Bangladesh, saying "Also, I am praying more people come to Christ."

Those words are even more moving than the stories of brutality. One Christian leader in Egypt said: "We thank God that...in all of Egypt, there is constant discrimination, for we thank God in all situations. Didn't He say to us that we are going to be persecuted, that as [His] followers, they will come after us? So if they are coming after us, that means maybe we are fulfilling that commandment. So we thank God that we are following Him.

"We don't hold onto anger, because we know that God is a God of justice. But **what we know is that we have to love these people. The Scripture that strikes me is, 'He who despises his brother, he is also a killer of his brother's soul.'** This is in 1 John 3:15. We forgive, but it is very difficult to forget. We ask forgiveness for ourselves every day, as God taught us. We ask Him every day, 'Forgive us our sins.'

"What I want to convey for the church in America is that we need to be supported by your prayers. We are part of the Body of Christ that is experiencing a lot of suffering and pain. As a shepherd, I am very pained to see...my children...killed and their blood...shed for simply believing in Jesus Christ...We give thanks to God but we really need people all over to pray, because we know that the only way this situation is going to be resolved and there will be peace in the area is through God. I am personally convinced that, if it were not for the prayers, we would not be alive. We probably would have also been killed. As the Psalm says, *'If God weren't with us, they would have swallowed us alive.'*

The story of my bike ride is so trite in comparison to what these people endure but I think

there is an appropriate connection. When I finally reached the curve and saw the end of the trail looming so close I was rewarded with a burst of energy and the desire to finish the path.

Our prayer for our brothers and sisters in Christ who are suffering so much needs to be that they, too, would be strengthened to fix their *“eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of their faith”* so that they might “keep to the path.” It’s unimaginable what they must be facing. But knowing that we remember them and that we are praying for them is a huge encouragement. As one man said, “We truly believe that when two or three agree together, God is there and He hears the prayers of His Body. When we know that you are praying for us, that gives us a great deal of comfort – to know that we are linked to the Body of Christ, that we are not alone.”

And as we pray for them, we must pray that for ourselves, as well. Pray that we **“keep to the path and *“fix our eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.”*** As the risen Christ said in the book of Revelation: *“Be thou faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.”* Amen.