



## The Burning Bush—Online article archive

### “Standing firm in the midst of a sinking world”



*Based upon a sermon preached by Rev. Ivan Foster in Kilskeery Free Presbyterian Church on Lord's Day, August 21st, 2005.*

“Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come,” Acts 26:22.

This world has ever been sinking down morally since the entrance of sin. It is not a process that is limited to the closing years of this age as some might think. It is true that the moral decline will accelerate in the days of the rise of the Antichrist. This is stated clearly in such places as 2 Timothy 3:1. “This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come.” But moral and spiritual decline has been an ongoing feature of every age. Its rate of decline may have varied throughout the ages but its inexorable continuance is undeniable. The world has been kept from sinking utterly into the mire of utter depravity by the restraining hand of God. There is a little phrase in Romans 1:26, which reminds us of that. “For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections . . .” Literally, it means “He let them go”. He had been holding them up but because of their kicking against His restraints He let them go. We see the world sinking today. It is a most distressing sight, especially if we see loved ones and friends sinking down before our eyes, refusing to accept the saving mercy of God. In the midst of such sinking, it is the duty of the believer to stand firm. On this anniversary of the opening of our first meeting house on this site thirty one years ago, it is good to remind ourselves of this central and paramount duty. Consider Paul’s words before King Agrippa.

#### I. REMAINING STEDFAST REQUIRES THE HELP OF GOD

**We are incapable of continuing without help.** If a man so talented as Paul required help then how much more we! The word “help” means “succour” or “aid” and carries within it the idea of the assistance of a servant to a master. This is the only place it is used in the New Testament. This is a help that is unique.

**It is the help of God.** The child of God is not alone and unaided in this world. The help of heaven is made available to us. It is a mystery that will only be revealed in eternity, but the Bible makes clear that the angelic hosts have a key role in the helping and preserving of God’s elect in this world. “Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?” Hebrews 1:14. The incident involving Elijah in which he was strengthened by an angel is another example of angelic help for the saints of God. “And as he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then an angel touched him, and said



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unto him, Arise and eat." 1 Kings 19:5. The Saviour's warnings regarding the treatment of children that believe on Him clearly indicate that there is a role for angels in the great providential care of believers by their Heavenly Father. "Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven," Matthew 18:10. This angelic watchcare is but the lesser help. God Himself stoops down to assist. He labours with us and imparts His strength. "For we are labourers together with God," 1 Corinthians 3:9. "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me," Philippians 4:13. "But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you," 1 Peter 5:10. Christ is the Chief Shepherd of the flock. He does not depute His work to another to carry out. Pastors may be under-shepherds but their duty may properly be summed up by saying that they minister to the flock in times of need by pointing them to Christ. That is the sum of our "help" for God's people. We are but as signposts which stand and point the way to Christ as the only help of poor sinners. It was by this help that Paul was able to remain faithful. That is the help we will require in order to press onward.

**We are required to 'obtain' this help.** This help must be sought after and obtained. There is the idea of hitting a target in this word "obtained". We must hit the mark in our seeking after God's grace. Acts 27:3 helps us understand the meaning of the word. "And the next day we touched at Sidon. And Julius courteously entreated Paul, and gave him liberty to go unto his friends to refresh himself." The expression "refresh himself" is the same Greek that is translated "obtain" in our text. As we partake of a refreshing cup so we must reach forth and "obtain" the help of God through the means God has ordained. Exercising faith in the promises of God and claiming them in prayer is, of course, the chief means of securing for ourselves this help of God. Acts 18:9-10 is undoubtedly one of the occasions in which the Lord in response to prayer, gave help to Paul.

### II. REMAINING STEDFAST ENTAILS MAINTAINING THE WITNESS OF THE GOSPEL

Paul's stedfastness, brought about by the refreshing grace of God, showed itself in his continuing to witness. Notice just what a true gospel witness consists of.

**His unlimited audience.** "Witnessing both to Jew and Gentile . . . small and great," 20, 22. He bore record of God's message to all he encountered. An example is given us in verses 4-18 as he tells the story of his own conversion. That courtroom was a microcosm of the world in general. You had every class of people represented. There was a king and doubtless there were slaves in attendance of the great men there listening to Paul. What Paul did that day as he told the story of God's mercy to him, was a snapshot of his life's work.

**His limited content.** In witnessing, he limited himself. "Saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come." Everything the stedfast person witnesses to will be found in the Bible. And all that is the Bible will be his message. Today, all too many curtail the message of God or trim it according to their audience. That is but sinking down with the world. That is not standing firm.



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**His central theme.** “That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles,” verse 23. The sufferings of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, proclaiming of Christ to the world — this is the message of the Bible. Proclaiming this message unaltered and uncensored is the work and mark of one who remains steadfast. It might be stated that you cannot silently tolerate error being taught in Christ’s name. Preaching Christ requires a preaching AGAINST everything that is contrary to Christ. Jude’s call must never be forgotten or ignore. “Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints,” Jude 1:3. This is what it is to stand firm.

### III. REMAINING STEDFAST PROVOKES OPPOSITION

Here is why so many fail to be steadfast. As soon as Paul makes this statement it provokes an angry retort from Festus. One wonders why, since Festus had already listened to Paul and, when speaking of him privately to King Agrippa, had nothing ill to say of him but rather seemed to suggest he was an innocent man (see 25: 13-21). Why the outburst then? Could it have been brought on by a fear that others might think him sympathetic to the gospel of Christ? Being ashamed of Christ and afraid of the sneers of men has damned many. There have been Christians, who fearing men, have been ashamed of Christ and of bearing His reproach and have therefore not remained faithful.

**Consider the low opinion held of the steadfast man.** He was mad. He was a man possessed of a raving frenzy. This is what they said of Christ. “And many of them said, He hath a devil, and is mad; why hear ye him?” John 10:20. It is here said of Paul and it will be said of all who remain faithful to Christ in this evil day. That is what it means to share in the reproach and shame of Christ. Remember the words of our Saviour. “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake,” Matthew 5: 10-11.

**See how they ridicule him publicly.** Festus spoke loudly. He shouted it out so that all in that court would hear his opinion. He wanted all to hear his opinion of Paul. But do not fear the loud voice of men raised against you, rather think of another occasion when a “loud voice” will be heard. “And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to him that sat on the cloud, Thrust in thy sickle, and reap: for the time is come for thee to reap; for the harvest of the earth is ripe . . . And another angel came out from the altar, which had power over fire; and cried with a loud cry to him that had the sharp sickle, saying, Thrust in thy sharp sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth; for her grapes are fully ripe,” Revelation 14: 15, 18. “And I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the fowls that fly in the midst of heaven, Come and gather yourselves together unto the supper of the great God,” Revelation 19: 17. It will be with the sound of a loud voice that God will announce His judgment upon evil men. Fear not the loud voice of man’s mockery, but rather fear the loud voice of God’s wrath.

**They will deprive the steadfast man of his liberties and rights.** This outburst took



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place in a courtroom where a man was on trial for his life, but such a disorderly outburst was most improper and against the letter of Roman law. But no rebuke was directed to Festus for his illegal intervention. This outrage was acceptable, since Paul was only a Christian determined to be steadfast to God. Thus were the martyrs for Christ in this kingdom burned in times past. None cared about the illegality of their arrest and arraignment or their sentence. They were only "Bible-believers". Did not Christ tell His disciples: ". . . yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service," John 16:2?

This is what it is to bear the reproach of Christ. In the face of it may we find grace to remain steadfast and firm for God.