

Still In

John 17:11-19 (NIV)

¹¹ I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. ¹² While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled. ¹³ "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. ¹⁴ I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. ¹⁵ My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. ¹⁷ Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

One of the hardest things I have found about being a parent is watching your child struggle. We are teaching our youngest to tie his shoes. It's hard to watch him struggle to do it himself. I want to save him the struggle. I know I can do it for him in two seconds, but that isn't going to help him in the long-run. It only saves me a minute here and there. The best thing I can do is to let him struggle and help him through it, to continue to patiently teach him the motions so that he can do it himself and then he could even teach others how to do it.

If this is how I feel as a parent, I imagine that Jesus must have been having a similar feeling about his disciples, his followers, as he prayed to God the Father the night before he went to the cross. He knew that in minutes a mob would come and separate him from his disciples. Jesus was leaving them, but they were staying. So, he prayed to his Father, "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you." (verse 11)

Jesus was leaving, but his disciples were still learning. They could be hurt. In fact, Jesus knew that they would get hurt – physically, emotionally. They would suffer the pangs of watching their Lord, their Messiah, their God bleed on a cross and die. He knew that forty days after his resurrection on Easter Sunday he would return to heaven, return to God the Father, and would no longer be physically present with them. His disciples would be persecuted by unbelievers – arrested, put on trial, imprisoned, whipped, flogged. Some would be beheaded. Some of them would even be crucified. Jesus knew full well the hatred that would come their way as he prayed to God the Father, "I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world." (verse 14) Jesus would, in a sense, leave his disciples and they would suffer much.

We know suffering. We suffer through a whole lot of things like Jesus' disciples did. We suffer through the effects of sin: illness, pain, financial trouble, relationship trouble, death. We suffer through temptations, resisting this pull to do things that we know are wrong, things which God has forbidden us to do, and yet we have this strong desire to do them anyway because of the idea of an immediate payout, immediate gratification. We suffer the pull of resisting the idea of not doing anything, of remaining passive when we know we should act because God wants us to act.

We may not be imprisoned for what we believe like the disciples were, but people put us on trial for our faith. They accuse the Word of God, the Bible, to be corrupted, incomplete, lacking, insufficient. They demand evidence for what we believe. And when we can't immediately produce the evidence they want, they write God's Word and us off. This makes them feel justified that they don't believe like we do.

We may not be put to death for what we believe like some of Jesus' disciples were, but we can and are often ostracized. Some will distance themselves from us because we believe differently. It's subtle. No matter how faithful you are at work, the ones who go to the same church building, they will get the raise and the promotion instead of you. The families at school who invite only the people who worship with them to their kid's birthday party choose to exclude you who don't worship with them. Or the people who talk with you until they see someone else from their church, and we are left on the outside.

We suffer because we follow Jesus, as Christians always have. The more we suffer, the more we wish for the suffering to end. The more we suffer temptations without reprieve we have to think that God doesn't care, that God is distant and uninvolved in our lives. The more we suffer from being ostracized and our faith constantly put on trial and dismissed, we want and ask God just to take care of all of this for us. End this suffering. Get me out of here! Just like the child who is frustrated at tying his shoe and just wants you to do it for him, but is that what's best?

God knows we suffer. He is not oblivious, and he is not uninvolved. One day, God will eliminate all our suffering on the day he takes you to heaven, but that day is not here yet. God does not eliminate all the suffering yet because he has more people to bring to know him and his name. He will not allow this world to end until everyone whom he has chosen to come to faith in him actually does, and he is using you to accomplish this mission, much in the same way he set apart his disciples for this very purpose.

Jesus sanctified his disciples and us by his Word. That fancy word “sanctify” means to make someone holy, to make them without sin, and also to set them apart for holy work, work for God, work to bring God’s Word to other people. God sanctifies people, makes them holy to do his holy work. He does this by his Word.

By his Word, God called you to belong to him, to be one with him, part of one body of believers. When he called you by his Word, he also gave you his name. He put his name on you in your baptism. “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” As these words were said while water was poured on you, God marked you with his name. He adopted you into his family. He made you holy, washing all of your sins away. By doing so, he gave you an inheritance of heaven, living forever with God in his presence. When he put his name on you, he also gave the promise that he would be with you always to the very end of the age. By God’s Word, by his holy baptism poured out on us, we have been sanctified, made holy. We have the power of God’s name and its protection over us. This is the joy of salvation, the joy that Jesus wants us all to have. This is a joy we have because God’s name is on us, because we belong to him instead of belonging to the world or to anyone else.

It is because we have God’s name on us that we stand out and we suffer, that we are put on trial, that we are ostracized. God knows this. He knows how we suffer for belonging to him, for having his name on us. But just like a parent who doesn’t just tie his son’s shoes every day, so God has decided that the answer to our suffering is not to go ahead and remove us from it. No, not yet. He has a different plan for us, for all his followers.

Jesus prayed that night before he went to the cross about all who would follow him, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.” (verse 15) Don’t take them out of the world. These disciples of mine, I have set them apart for work, I have sanctified them. They are going to affect this world. They are going out to spread my Word. They are going out to spread the truth, the truth of what God has done for them, the truth of what God continues to do for them. I want them in this world to spread my Word, that truth, so that many more can have the name of God put on them, that they would come to believe in me as their holiness, their perfection, their salvation.

So, don’t take them out of the world, God says, but protect them. Protect them by the power of your name. Protect them with your mighty hand. Protect them from this world that hates them and will make them suffer. Protect them because they are going to go out now and declare the Word of God, the joy of knowing what I have done for them to deliver them from the devil, the world, hell itself. Protect them from the evil one who will try to cause them to despair, to want to give up, to ask that they leave this world.

Yes, we suffer. We suffer the effects of sin. We suffer for following Jesus. And the time will come when God delivers us from this world. Until then, we are in the world, but not of the world. Until then, God protects us by his name so as to not lose any of us. He keeps us here to send us out to declare his Word, to declare the truth of God and what he has done for all people, that he is our perfection, our salvation. This means that if you are still here, then God still has this mission for you, a purpose that he has commissioned you for. You are here because God has sent you out into this world. Who will you affect? We often don’t know, but God does. God knows who you will affect, who you will reach with his Word, with the truth. That’s why he still has you here. If you are still here in this world, then it’s not time for God to take you away from the suffering yet, to take you out of the world. Instead, he is sending you out. He has made you holy by his Word. He will and does protect us from the evil one as he sends you and me to declare his truth. Amen.