

When Sheep Fight Back
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Artwork by Douglas Alves Ferreira

Several people have written to me asking about various Scriptures that could be viewed as supporting a Christian's right to defend themselves against those who attack them. The two main examples they have given are Stephen when he gave a defense before the Jewish leaders, and Paul as he was repeatedly brought before the Jews and the Romans and charged with various transgressions.

As Christians we are charged to "study to show ourselves approved unto God... rightly dividing the word of truth" (II Timothy 2:15). To find God's approval, we must arrive at His mind. Without question, man has various biases. These biases become evident when he seeks to arrive at an understanding and application of Scriptures. The saint who approaches this subject of suffering needs to be cognizant of the fact that the flesh in which he/she dwells has a strong aversion to suffering. The flesh will look for an interpretation of Scriptures that will provide a way to avoid pain, loss, humiliation and everything else that is a part of taking up the cross and following Christ. The flesh will not willingly embrace an afflicted path. It is always casting about for some way to walk on that broad and easy path while having some hope that it too will lead to life.

To arrive at truth as we study the word of God we must quiet our soul, and arrive at a place of contentment where we simply want to apprehend the mind of God. We must be satisfied with whatever the Father might reveal to us. It is clearly the will of God that His sons and daughters suffer many things in order that they might arrive at spiritual maturity. The fruit of the Spirit is developed in the face of adversity. When else does a man need longsuffering other than during extended seasons of suffering? When does man need gentleness? Is it not when his flesh is provoked to respond with harshness? The experiences of this present age

are designed to provoke a response of the flesh that the spirit man might rise up and put the flesh to death.

The trials God puts His sons and daughters through are often described as “fiery.” We are like precious metal, gold or silver. When taken out of the earth these metals have impurities in them. A refiner will heat the metal to a very high temperature until it enters a liquid state. When this happens, the impurities inside are released and come to the surface where they can be removed. This is the same process the Father subjects His children unto time and again. He desires that we come forth in complete purity before His eyes.

The role of suffering in bringing forth mature sons was revealed from the first book of the Bible. There is a profound parable contained in the curse that befell the woman when she sinned. God does everything by design. He could have chosen anything He desired as the consequence of sin. What He chose was intended to reveal a deep truth. Eve, the wife of the first Adam, is a type of the Church, which is the bride of the last Adam (Christ). This is brought out in numerous passages.

Ephesians 5:31-32

"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.

What God spoke to the woman in the Garden is intended as a natural picture of spiritual truth. The physical world reveals deep truths of the unseen Kingdom of God. Consider the following words as a parable.

Genesis 3:16

To the woman He said: "I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children; Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

The woman is the church. She can only bring forth children through sorrow and pain. Even though this is the manner of bringing forth children, the church's desire will remain toward her husband, Christ. He shall rule over her. As the church submits to her Head, she must obey His call. Yahshua has said, "Take up your cross and follow Me." This is an invitation to embrace pain and suffering. It is the only manner in which children can be brought forth.

You may recognize that there is a problem with this parable. Most of the people in the body of Christ today are NOT submitting to Christ for Him to rule over them. They are NOT heeding the desire of the Husband. It should be kept in mind that Eve was formed from a remnant portion taken from Adam's body. Christ too has a body. The bride of Christ is not the entire body, but a choice portion. There is a remnant that is taken from the body of Christ to become His bride, even as there was a remnant taken from Adam's body to fashion Eve. If you would be part of the bride of Christ, your desire must remain toward Him. You must submit to Christ ruling over you, even when His pleasure in your life leads to pain and sorrow.

If Christians approached the study of the Scriptures with these things in mind, understanding the necessity of suffering, they would be less apt to misinterpret passages such as those relating to Stephen and Paul. Let us look carefully to what is revealed in these encounters.

The word “defense” is often used in relation to the acts of these men as they stood before their accusers. This is an appropriate word. Paul used a Greek word that is correctly translated as defense when he spoke of standing before his accusers.

II Timothy 4:16

At my first *defense* no one stood with me, but all forsook me.

The Greek word translated as defense in this verse is “apologia.” It is the same root word from which we get our English words “apology” and “apologetics.” Apologetics is a fancy word one often finds in association with seminary studies. The World English Dictionary defines apologetics in the following manner.

- The branch of theology concerned with the defense and rational justification of Christianity
- A defensive method of argument

Our English word “apology” has greatly changed in meaning over the years. It originally meant “a defense, excuse, or justification in speech or writing, as for a cause or doctrine.” This word is still used in this manner today, but more often it is used to denote a person asking for forgiveness, demonstrating contriteness for some action, or words. This was not Paul’s meaning, however. He was giving a defense using rational justification. What must be determined is “what was Paul defending?” Was Paul defending himself, or defending the message he was preaching?

Let us begin by looking at Stephen’s “defense” before the Jewish leaders. Stephen gave a lengthy speech. The entire event is found between Acts 6:8 - 7:60. In Acts 7:2 Stephen begins his defense. He starts by speaking of Abraham, then speaks of Jacob and Joseph before ending with a long section on Moses. It is evident from this entire passage that Stephen is not defending himself. He is defending Christ as the one that all the prophets and patriarchs looked forward to. Stephen ends his defense with the following words:

Acts 7:51-53

"You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it."

If Stephen were motivated by a desire to deliver himself from suffering, this was not the way to do it. It is quite evident that self-protection was not Stephen’s motive. The reaction to Stephen’s words was intense and violent hatred. Those present gnashed their teeth at him, drove him outside, and stoned him to death while Stephen prayed that God would not lay

these things to their charge. Among those in violent opposition to Stephen was Paul, for he had not yet been converted.

Soon afterwards we read of Paul's conversion experience as he was on the road to Damascus where he intended to arrest and persecute Christians. He had a dramatic encounter with Christ that left him blinded for a season, and he was led into Damascus by the hand. God sent Ananias to speak to Paul.

Acts 9:15-16

The Lord said to [Ananias], "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. *For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake.*"

Undoubtedly, if Paul had set his mind to avoid suffering, he would have been working against the will of Yahweh. Those who would suggest that this was Paul's motive when he gave a defense before the Jews and Romans have misjudged the man. Consider the following testimony from Paul's own lips.

Colossians 1:24

I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church...

Acts 21:13

Then Paul answered, "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Yahshua."

These words were not a mere idle boast. At this time Paul had already experienced most of the following:

II Corinthians 11:23-28

Are they ministers of Christ? - I speak as a fool - I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness - besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.

Paul was not focused on self-preservation. His focus was upon fulfilling the ministry entrusted to him, and finishing the course set before him. Paul was striving for the prize, and did not count his own life precious, so that he might be able to finish his course with joy.

Acts 20:22-24

And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen

to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Yahshua, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

In these words we find Paul's true motive. This must be ever kept in mind as the saints look at the various encounters Paul had with the Jews and the Romans. There were occasions when Paul spoke a word that delivered him from suffering. Following is one example.

Acts 22:24-29

The commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, and said that he should be examined under scourging, so that he might know why they shouted so against him. And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?" When the centurion heard that, he went and told the commander, saying, "Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman." Then the commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" He said, "Yes." The commander answered, "With a large sum I obtained this citizenship." And Paul said, "But I was born a citizen." Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him.

There may also come occasions in the life of the saints where speaking up may deliver them from unnecessary suffering. It is evident from the pattern of Paul's life that he was not consumed with a desire to escape suffering. Five times he received 39 lashes. It is recorded that Paul submitted to such lashing at the hand of the Romans on another occasion, only revealing that he was a Roman citizen after the fact.

Acts 16:37-40

But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us openly, uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us into prison. And now do they put us out secretly? No indeed! Let them come themselves and get us out." And the officers told these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Romans. Then they came and pleaded with them and brought them out, and asked them to depart from the city. So they went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia; and when they had seen the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.

What was Paul's motive in revealing this information AFTER he had already been beaten? Undoubtedly, Paul had concern for the other Christians who remained in this city. It would greatly temper the attitude of these officials to know that they stood in some peril for an illegal act, leading them to pursue no further harassment against the Christians Paul left behind.

The Christian must guard against developing a theology of avoiding all suffering. There are times when Christ will deliver His people from the mouth of the lions, but there are also times when He would have them to embrace suffering. We must be content with whatever Christ chooses for us. There is no virtue in suffering when it is not the will of God. There are few today who err in this direction, however. The vast majority of the saints are erring by

seeking to avoid all suffering. The doctrines of the church today have led many to conclude that Christ suffered so that they need not do so.

Christ said that ALL who would be His disciples must take up their cross and follow Him. Yahshua warned His disciples often that men would persecute them. Paul manifested a proper balance in his life to suffering. He did not go out of his way to avoid it, yet when the Spirit directed him to speak a word that would alleviate unnecessary suffering he spoke it. We too must be led of the Spirit in all things. I have stressed so much this subject of suffering as it is almost completely rejected, avoided, or misunderstood by the saints today.

A brother in Christ wrote to me yesterday the following:

Paul in many ways defended himself with wisdom the Holy Spirit gave him. He used logic and divine wisdom AND the power of government to extricate himself away from probable death at the hands of the Jewish authorities, or being crucified by the Romans. He also appealed to his own citizenship rights as a roman to get himself out of prison and a fairer trial at the hands of Caesar...

What this brother is referring to is Paul's defense before the Roman Governor Festus. When Festus asked Paul if he were willing to return back to Jerusalem to be tried before the Jews, Paul answered in the following manner.

Acts 25:9-11

But Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favor, answered Paul and said, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?" So Paul said, "I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know. For if I am an offender, or have committed anything deserving of death, I do not object to dying; but if there is nothing in these things of which these men accuse me, no one can deliver me to them. I appeal to Caesar."

Was this an act of self-preservation, as the brother suggested? Was Paul simply seeking to get a hearing before Caesar, because he thought he would get a fairer trial? If we study the word of God as workmen that need not be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of God, we will find that Paul had previously been told by God that he must go to Rome. Paul was not seeking to escape suffering, but rather to accomplish the will of God, and to finish his course and ministry. Prior to this encounter with Festus in chapter 25 of Acts, we read the following in chapter 19.

Acts 19:21-22

When these things were accomplished, *Paul purposed in the Spirit*, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, *I must also see Rome.*"

Note the highlighted words. This determination to go to Rome was not something Paul cooked up in his soul. He had no intent to go there to escape from the Jews. The Spirit had revealed to Paul that he must go to Rome. Yahweh affirmed this to Paul again, a short time later.

Acts 27:21-26

Paul stood in the midst of them and said..., "For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; *you must be brought before Caesar*; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you.' Therefore take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me."

In examining the various "defenses" that Paul gave, there is great evidence that Paul was not defending himself, but rather he was defending the message Christ had entrusted to him. Perhaps the greatest example of Paul's focus is found in his words to King Agrippa, Bernice and Festus. This great defense is found in Acts chapter 26, comprising the entire chapter. Paul testified of his early life as a persecutor of the Christians. He speaks of his conversion and the ministry appointed to him by Christ. The effect of Paul's words are revealed in King Agrippa's response:

Acts 26:28

Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian."

Truly, this was Paul's heart. He was giving a defense of Christ. There are some who would point to Paul's various encounters with the Jews and Romans to support a contention that it is the will of God for Christians to take up a defense of self. Some are even advocating an armed defense. I have Christians who have written to me who are creating fortress like structures, and have prepared themselves by acquiring guns and bullets. People of God, such actions are not the will of the Father. Such a mindset is contrary to the pattern we see in the suffering of Christ and His disciples. How will the saints ever fulfill the following words penned by Paul and John if they set their focus on fighting evil men through physical force?

Romans 8:35-39

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Yahshua our Lord.

Revelation 12:11

And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.

It is not coincidental that sheep are mentioned in both of these passages. Christ has given to His disciples the parable of sheep as they encounter evil men and women in this world. He demonstrated by His own life and death what the behavior of His disciples should be.

Isaiah 53:7

He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.

Christ was perfected as a son through the things He suffered. So too must we be brought to spiritual maturity through similar means.

Philippians 1:29

“For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake...”

Acts 14:22

"We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God."

As yesterday's post testified, we are to be as sheep in the midst of wolves. The disciples of Christ are to conduct themselves wisely as serpents, they are to beware of men, while at the same time being "harmless as doves."

Paul was not always perfect in this. On one occasion as he faced the Jews, he was ordered to be struck by the High Priest. Paul responded with reviling words:

Acts 23:1-5

Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?" And those who stood by said, "Do you revile God's high priest?" Then Paul said, "I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'"

People of God, it is truly wresting an interpretation from the Scripture to conclude that this passage supports adopting a combative attitude towards one's accusers. Paul admitted his error.

Do you really want to rely upon your own cunning and strength to deliver you from the hands of evil men? There is no peace in such a course. You will always find someone more cunning, or more powerful and determined than you. Let us entrust our lives as Christ did to the One who judges righteously. Yahweh will not deliver us from all suffering, which is why many choose rather to lean upon their own abilities. Yet He has promised that He will never leave us or forsake us.

Isaiah 43:2-3

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior...”

Yahweh has determined that His people must be perfected through suffering. This message is found from Genesis to Revelation. Let us entrust our lives to Him, setting our eyes on the finish line. Let us adopt the attitude of Paul, not counting our lives as precious that we might finish our race with joy. Let us leave room for God to defend us. We are sheep. He is the Shepherd. His rod and His staff will protect us. Don't take up the responsibility for your

own defense. Admit your weakness in this area. When we are weak, He is strong.

I am confident that God will put every man and woman to the test in this area. He will prove to them whether they have acted wisely in that which they have chosen to look to for their deliverance and protection. If you are setting your confidence in the arm of the flesh, your confidence will be tested. Let the saints of God place their confidence in Yahweh.

How easy it is to begin to take up one's own defense, only to see that the fruits of the flesh begin to manifest.

Galatians 5:19-21

Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are... hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders... and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

When we begin to enter into strife with other men, it is difficult to keep our flesh out of it. When delivering ourselves becomes the focus, we lose sight of our call to be conformed to the image of Christ.

It requires faith in God to look to Him to deliver us, while at the same time asking Yahweh to be merciful to our adversaries. We are not apt to "speak a blessing when reviled," or "bless those who curse you" when we have set our minds to contend with others. The fruit of the Spirit is revealed as we do not count our own lives precious to us. Then we are able to perfect the manifestation of patience, peace, gentleness, humility, longsuffering, and self-control.

Have you never been in a conversation where you began to defend yourself, only to find yourself losing patience, becoming angry, your voice rising, and speaking things you later regret. The surest way to avoid falling into a manifestation of the flesh is to not seek to defend it. Accept the blows of others with patience. Entrust your life to the Father.

I Peter 2:19-20

For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.

If you want to find in Scripture some justification to defend yourself, and contend with your adversaries, you will no doubt find it. Ask yourself, however, "Will following such a course lead to a greater death to the flesh?" On the other hand, will choosing to not resist an evil person lead you to a greater humility and conformity to Christ? Yahshua said, "Whoever strikes you on the right cheek, turn to them the left also." For the sake of conscience, this is the course I must choose.

May you be blessed with peace and understanding in these days.