

Pastor Letter: Faith of a Pastor's Wife (10/2/22)

In attempting to connect this week's Old Testament passage from the book of Lamentations to the New Testament book of 2 Timothy, I kept circling back to the topic of the "faith of a widow." I had the honor of officiating at a retired Baptist pastor's and his wife's funerals, who both worshipped with our congregation for a brief period of time.

The book of Lamentations consists of 5 poetic laments spoken by various orators. This week's scripture lesson comes from the first liturgical song, which is bewailing the destruction of the beloved Jerusalem, the Temple, and the Israelite nation. The poet is using the metaphor of a widow to describe the devastation of Jerusalem, "How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations!" (Lam. 1:1).

For several months I visited a retired Baptist pastor during a lingering terminal illness that eventually took his life. His wife remained ever vigilant in caring for her loving husband and persevered to make both their final funeral arrangements. During those many visits, I heard many interesting stories of their lives together, and especially the details of their ministry in several small Baptist churches.

During her memorial service, I stated that she had the most difficult job in the world, faithfully serving as the "pastor's wife." This clergy couple faithfully served in some of the smallest Baptist churches for very little financial compensation. Although the resources were minimal, the wife managed to successfully raise 5 wonderful children.

This amazing woman shared some incredible stories just how poorly their respective congregations treated this clergy couple, but she always attempted to respond with Christian love, forgiveness, and compassion. She responded in much the same manner as the widow in our OT passage, "She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies," (v. 2).

When I was in Seminary, I became close friends with a pastor from South Africa. While he was studying here in the USA, his wife was attempting to minister to a 1500-member church. It was not long before the grueling work load of raising a large family and operating the church ravaged with Aides, caused her to become very ill. During a Christmas break between classes, the seminary student body raised enough money to purchase a round-trip plane ticket, travel luggage, and travel clothes for the anxious pastor to return home to South Africa and to care for his ailing wife.

I spent one summer at a seminary in Thagoto, Kenya. I traveled home with the students on weekends to visit their families and their home congregations. I was truly amazed at the dedication of the loving wives of these seminary students. These faithful women operated the family home, raised their children, and served their churches with very little funds from the Presbyterian Church of East Africa. Many times, the students would spend ¼ of their monthly stipend of \$50 for travel just to bring home monies to maintain the meager family home.

I was equally impressed with the wives of the pastors I encountered on my mission trips to Ethiopia. It was not uncommon for the wives in Kenya and Ethiopia to carry 5-gallon buckets of water on their backs and their heads for great distances. They carried water not only for their individual households but often also for their farm animals. These remarkable women also cared for the older women and widows in the community and their church in which their husband's served as pastor.

I often encounter missionary couples serving the Church in foreign countries. These wives faithfully serve as teachers, nurses, and various ministries of compassion. I have witnessed these women organizing and operating orphanages, medical clinics, food banks, homeless shelters, safe houses, schools, agriculture facilities, and trade schools.

Sadly, I have observed how enemies of the Church of Jesus Christ use wives and children as a means of attacking successful pastors and other church leaders. It is even more sinister when members of the congregation use this diabolical method to attack their own pastor.

The “pastor’s wife” has the most impossible job in the world. They are expected to fully support their husband, corral their unruly children, play the piano for worship, direct the choir, lead the women’s programs, direct the youth group, obtain baby-sitters for the church nursery, organize missional outreach ministries, and care for the homeless who come seeking a handout. The Baptist wife of which I spoke earlier, revealed many of these experiences during my visits. I think it was a way for her to decompress as she was caring for her dying husband.

This dedicated woman faithfully served her husband, her family, her church and her Lord in much the same loving manner as the apostle Paul was attempting to teach his son in the faith, Timothy, in our NT passage. Paul writes, “for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling,” (2 Timothy 1:7-9).

It is an easy task to maintain one’s faith in serving the Lord when everything is going smoothly in our lives. But it is a completely different story to maintain our Christian faith when we are suffering in the trenches of physical, emotional and spiritual warfare. The poet in Lamentations, the apostle Paul, Timothy, the Baptist widow, and other pastors’ wives that I have mentioned, realize the tremendous difficulty of maintaining faith in Almighty God when we experience the dark side of life’s cruel trials and tribulations.

May each of us put the words of the apostle Paul into practice in our daily walk of faith as he writes, “But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. ¹³ Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus,” (vv. 7-9).

Blessings and Peace in Christ,

Pastor Larry