

## Furnace of Affliction

The whole of the Christian life is a striving for one thing: to be faithful to Christ until one's last breath. *For he who endures to the end will be saved*" (Matt. 24:13). One must cross the finish line. One must never give up. St. Paul knew this well, *"I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith"* (1 Tim. 2:4-7).

In an age where easy is a virtue and effort an annoyance, this exhortation falls on deaf ears. Words like "faith," "faithfulness," "fidelity," and "finished" are a foreign language. It is all babble, indistinct and nonsensical. But dead center in the Scriptures, there is no getting around it: the need for steadfastness in all matters related to faith. Because the greatest temptation of Christians will be to quit, to *apostatize*. To take the easy way out. To come down from the cross.

Having experienced this same temptation, the saints warned about this as the "demon of the noon day." As in the story of the Exodus from the Old Testament. While witnessing the Lord's destruction of their enemies, the people of Israel were happy to be led through the Red Sea on dry land. They sang for joy. Isn't God great!? But then Moses leads them on into the desert, into the furnace of affliction for the real test. *"For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives"* (Heb. 12:6).

The people of Israel soon changed their tune. They cried to Moses, *"Were there no graves in Egypt that you led us out in the desert in order to die!?"* (Exodus 14:11). In this furnace of affliction, the Lord in His wisdom strips those whom He calls from the delusion of pride and self-sufficiency. This is God's only way, this baked and barren Sinai road.

In this furnace of the Sinai individual effort dissipates. Worldly security dissolves. But here grace begins. Elijah the prophet, despairing in that same deep desert was sent a Raven with a morsel of bread, God's emblem of grace. The desert is where Elijah's hands were emptied. But into palms came God's greatest gift, the blessing of the Raven.

But those who apostatize refuse to empty their hands. So they run back to the world and its idols. It was all just too much, this path full of thorns that stripped them bare of all their needy, petty gods. Better the devil's mirage than the painful truth staring them in the eye.

Such a shocking thing God's love often is, the opposite of what many think it should be: all syrupy and confectioned. We must all pass through the furnace test. We must all stumble and fall. But the main thing is to get back up and continue on by the strength of the Raven's gift, i.e., *by the grace of God*.

The Lord's medicine is not always honey to the tongue. *"For it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"* (Heb. 10:31), indeed.

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