



The Middle East Initiative

*Pray.
Learn.
Engage.*

Where is God?

By Razek Siriani

Text

“12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice in as much as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed....17 For it is time for judgment to begin with God’s household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?...19 So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.” - 1 Peter 4



Reflection

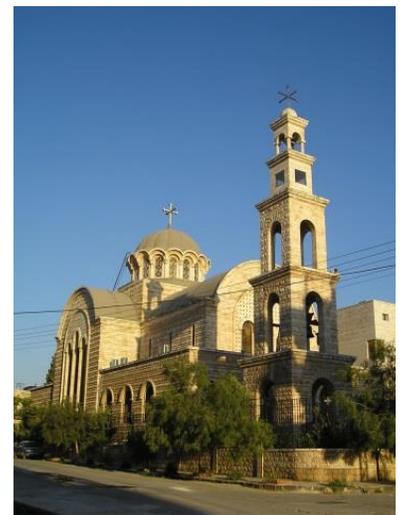
“Do not be surprised.” This is what Peter the Apostle is telling us in a straightforward manner. Life on earth is bringing us many unexpected surprises. These surprises could be times of goodness, wellness, and prosperity; or could be times of difficulties, harshness and despair. In this passage, Peter warns about the coming of a more intense period of persecution and oppression. He stressed mental and psychological readiness for such times of difficulties and suffering. And it is not surprising that Christians fall under difficult times as he said. According to Peter, there is no shame in suffering for the Lord. Instead, it is to be counted as a blessing. Peter said these words almost 2000 years ago. We are not sure if he had a prophecy for the future for Christians or was it a mere assumption.

Recently, I was reading a biography and came across few sentences which for some time I have had a serious problem understanding and interpreting from a Christian perspective. It says, “we are facing real enemies in the world and keeping our nation at peace, sometimes require battle”, and “the purpose of war is not defending self but establishing justice.” These two sentences reflect an

imperialist way of thinking. The early 17th century religious understanding of a “just war” developed by the church in the West has become the foundation of modern international law which, by its turn, is using the power of arms and superiority to achieve justice and order to the world. The means justifies the ends.

From a Christian and Biblical perspective, these theories of “just war” and “armed interference in a conflict to restore peace” are not acceptable. Indeed, our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us to resist evil, but in a non-violent way. He teaches us not to submit to evil, but instead to refuse to deal with it according to its terms (e.g. the temptation of Jesus on the mountain). Therefore, we as Christians are not supposed to be dictated by our evil opponents, but are to find an alternative way to approach them and prevent a conflict. This is what St. Paul was trying to articulate in his two letters to the Corinthians.

Apparently, it is not surprising that people in the Middle East, and particularly in Syria and Iraq, nowadays are raising both hands up towards the sky and imploring “where is God?” They are tired from the tough times they are living in. Their life is destroyed; if not physically, it is destroyed morally and spiritually. Thousands are displaced from their homes and their country; thousands are persecuted; hundreds are killed because of the wars and in some cases because they refused to change their religion; hundreds of women are raped by fanatic Jihadists and terrorists; hundreds are kidnapped or executed; thousands of people are now refugees in different countries; homes and buildings are destroyed; businesses have collapsed; churches are burned and destroyed purposely; bishops and priests are abducted, hundreds of children have lost their parents; countries are divided; and for those who are remaining safety is lost. The people of Syria are asking “where is God in the midst of all these troubles, deaths, persecutions, displacement, and destruction? Is God our creator not seeing what is going on? Why does God allow this? How can we continue surviving in the midst of all these waves of troubles and wars, and how can we continue our life in a place with many threats and nobody in the world is caring about our destiny?”



The people of Syria are asking questions not about the very existence of God, but they are wondering why God is silent, not moving or performing miracles to save people. Let’s remember here that Jesus Himself asked a similar question on the cross: “O Lord, O Lord why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). Paul the Apostle once described his sufferings: *“Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger*

and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked” (II Corinthians 11:24-28). Why would Paul do all that? Why put up with that suffering, danger, and death? The simple answer is that he did it because he was convinced that Jesus was worth it. He was convinced that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, who had come to die for our sins and rise from the dead to give us hope. Peter, too, was convinced that in order to win a life with Christ, there had to be sacrifices and had to be a way to take up the cross and follow Jesus.

Yet, the question for some people is this: is it true that sometimes God allows persecution to purify the person and the church? Some people believe that this is a punishment brought by God because they have forgotten the law. The answer to that: we don't know. But even in the Hebrew Scriptures, we have some examples that God did not betray God's people, but rather reached out to save them even when they were sinners (ref. Book of Isaiah). Living in the new chapter of belief in God after the incarnation, the death and the resurrection of Jesus the savior, we believe that God shall act in the right time and the right place. That's why Peter said: *“.. if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God”*. We truly believe that the warm act of prayers of the believers will bring a merciful act of salvation from God. This is the teaching of today's church to its believers in Syria. *“Hope, love and rejoice”* are the words that will defy the “enemy” and the troubles. These words may not heal the ongoing wounds or ease the sufferings or stop the war, but that is the way to peace. Peter enlightens us that we Christians should not be dragged down by acts which are not ascribed onto us by God. We should not be tempted to face violence with counter violence, or face extremism with intolerance, or return evil with counter evilness; rather with love and peace. Apparently, this does not mean that we do not defend ourselves from evil, but we have to find an alternative way to defy it as Jesus did on the mountain, even if that evil confronts us physically. *“The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. (2 Corinthians 10: 4-5).*

It is ironic that in the crisis of Syria, the fellow neighbor and compatriot have become enemy and stranger. Suddenly, my country has turned into an imperfect and dangerous place to live in. Suddenly, many Christians in Syria find themselves unprotected by anyone. Strangely enough, Syria, which has hosted through its history many civilizations and has invented the first letters of writing in the world, the country which has a mosaic of religions, cultures, and ethnic groups, has turned into a burning place and been destroyed. Thousands of Christians and other Syrians have left the country because life has become unbearable. Some of the Christians have found that taking refuge in other places in the world is an alternative way. Others have found that staying in the country is an option while some did not have time for options because they were forced to leave or



be killed instantly. In all cases, what is important is doing and praising God's work in our life. This is the only way to find the "lost" God in our life.

In fact, our treasure as Christian is "hope." We live in the Lord's living hope which gives us the power to continue our life despite all difficulties. At times of fear we give trust, at times of persecution we spread the word of God and testify to God's glory, at times of troubles we become stronger in God and do good to people who are in need or who are making troubles for us, and at times of despair we give thanks to God. *"Kings will be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. They will bow down before you with their faces to the ground; they will lick the dust at your feet. Then you will know that I am the Lord; those who hope in me will not be disappointed"* (Isaiah 49:23).

We have to continue building the house of the Lord anywhere and everywhere we exist. Even in the midst of troubles we, as Christians, should not be exempt from this mission. With hope we can do many things.

At this time, we pray that Jesus Christ, the King of Peace, will bring peace and tranquility to Syria, its people and Christians in the Middle East. We trust that soon God will answer the cry of the people "where are you God?" Let us keep our eyes on the Lord and remember that the Lord is in control, and that faith is the mechanism by which we will endure the tough times.

Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syriac

O Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of sloth, despair, lust of power, and idle talk.

But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love to Thy servant.

Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own transgressions, and not to judge my brother, for blessed art Thou, unto ages of ages. Amen.

O Merciful God, the voice of our prayer knocks at Thy door, prevent not from thy devotees the petitions of their needs. We call upon thee, O God, to assist us in our infirmities. O good one. Hearken to the voice of our supplication and grant our petitions in thy mercy.

Read Psalm 121: 1-8

Questions for study:

1. Do you believe that God allows time of persecutions and sufferings?
2. What is your perspective and reflection on that?
3. From a Biblical and Christian perspective, how can you build peace in the face of aggressions?
4. Based on the current sufferings and persecutions of the people of the Middle East, including its Christians, how can you learn more, and what can you do, including supporting the work and ministries of Global Ministries' partners in the region?

About the Author

Razek Siriani was born in Aleppo, Syria in 1959. He belongs to the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch and was ordained as a lay deacon in 1999. He graduated from the University of Aleppo with a degree a B.A in English Literature, and pursued his post-graduate studies in Dublin, Ireland for two Diplomas: Religious Studies and Development Studies. He obtained his Master Degree in Adult Education (M.Ed.) from the University of Manchester, UK.

Since 1985, he has worked with the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) coordinating the Youth Program in Syria. Later he was selected by the MECC Executive Committee to be the Director of the Unit on Education and Renewal. In 2003, he was appointed to direct the MECC Department of International & Ecumenical Relations.

In 2007, he coordinated the relief and development programs for Iraqi refugees in the northern part of Syria in affiliation with Department of the Ecumenical Relations & Development at the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Syria. In 2011, he coordinated the relief and humanitarian office at the Syrian Orthodox Archdiocese of Aleppo, Syria in service of displaced and vulnerable people.

In 2013, he moved with his family to Boston fleeing the war and seeking safety.