**2016 New York UBF Spring Conference**

We are His chosen people.

1 Peter 2:9 *“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”*

Suffering has many forms – persecution, chronic or terminal disease, mental disorder, social rejection or bullying, physical or emotional abuse, and past trauma, etc. While living on earth, we are often hurt by others and we also hurt others. We suffer because of our sins or by others’ sins. Some people give up and some people fight with hope in their suffering. People ask where they can find cures. People ask why certain things are happening to certain people. Christians in this world do suffer as well. Apostle Peter wrote the Book of 1 and 2 Peter to encourage suffering Christians under Roman Emperor Nero. They were driven out of Jerusalem and scattered throughout Asia Minor because of their faith, facing social and economic persecution. Some were harassed; a few would be tortured and even put to death. While the audiences of these letters were suffering Jewish Christians in A.D. 62~64, we can relate ourselves with them because we do suffer in this world while we try to live by faith and we do want to find the light in the darkness.

Very interestingly, Apostle Peter uses the word - ‘living” a lot in his letters. A living hope, the living word of God, the living Stone, and living stones. For example, he said in 1 Peter 1: 3-4, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into **a living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.” According to this verse, we have a living hope as Jesus has given us new birth. If there is a living hope, is there a dead hope? Yes, if it comes from the dead, it will be a dead hope. And if the hope does not come from God, it can be a dead hope or wishful thinking that can be crushed depending on our situations or by death. Apostle Peter also said in 1 Peter 2: 4-5**,** “As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Here, the living Stone, with the capital letter S, indicates Jesus. The living stones, with the small letter s, indicate Christians. We, as living stones, are being built into a spiritual house even today. Then, what happens if we have a living hope? What happens if we are living stones when we are being built into a house?

To have some ideas about living stones, let us think about some architecture that has living materials as building blocks. Let us see the picture on the slide. These are the living root bridges in India. People used living trees to make the bridges in jungles. Because the trees are planted in the water, there is life in it so that it naturally self-renews and self-strengthens. Under ideal conditions, they last for many hundreds of years. Because of the life in the building blocks, they have the power to become the strong bridges.

As living stones, we have life in us that can build a strong house that endures. We might suffer, get crushed, devastated, and torn. But we are being built into a spiritual house that eternally lasts. God who created heavens and earth is building this house, having Jesus, the living Stone, as our cornerstone and capstone. We also have a hope of eternal life. And this living hope is not only for the future. It begins as we come to know Christ and trust him.

Before people buy a house to live, they usually go and check the house. For example, Karen, my wife**,** and I checked the apartment in Dallas, before we move into it. We asked whether there are many college kids and whether they make a lot of noise. We didn’t want to suffer because of college parties on Friday.

Then what is the identity of this spiritual house that is being built? Who is my neighbor? Let us read verse 9. “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” How many positive words are in this verse? Here, we find 5 positive adjectives: (1) chosen, (2) royal, (3) holy, (4) special, and (5) wonderful. This sounds unrealistic. How do we know that we are chosen, royal, holy, and special?

First, chosen. We are God’s chosen people because it is not we, but God who chose us even before the creation of the world. John 15:16 reads *“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.”* And we do not belong to the world. Instead, we are chosen out of the world. John 15:19 reads, *“If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.”* Thus, we can have this confidence that we are belonging to Him.

Second, royal priesthood. We are chosen to be a royal priesthood. In the Old Testament, the duty of the priests was to pray and to offer sacrifices to God. But now, every Christians have this priestly duty to proclaim the Good News to all the people. While Jesus has become our high priest forever in the order of Melchizedek, he is also the king. Because we belong to King Jesus, we are royal priests.

Third, holy nation. We are a holy nation because Jesus took our burden of sin. The burden of sin is too heavy to bear. We were too ashamed to lift up our faces to God in the darkness. However, when we were overwhelmed by our sins, God forgave our transgressions through the blood of Jesus. The author of Hebrews said this in Hebrews 10:10; *“We have been set apart as holy because Jesus Christ did what God wanted him to do by sacrificing his body once and for all. (GW)”*

Finally, special possession. We are God’s special possession. What does God’s special possession mean? It means that God set us apart for His special purpose. He has His hand on us and we became his special possession. God told Moses in Exodus that the Israelites would be His treasured possession out of all nations. Romans 4:16 says, this promise is guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring - those who have the faith of Abraham. Thus, we, by faith and by the obedience that comes through faith, became God’s treasured possession.

While I was meditating on 1 Peter 2:9, my wife Karen, said that I might have to first define what the darkness is. I agreed with her while I didn’t say it loud. Hence**,** I wanted to find my own definition of darkness. One of my favorite Bible verses came to my mind, which are Matthew 4:15-16. They read “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” These are verses from Isaiah 9:1,2. After Jesus read these verses, from that time on Jesus began to preach, saying, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”*

In darkness, we suffer. According to these verses, those who living in darkness are people who live in the land of the shadow of death; they would experience the shadow of death, mentally, physically, or spiritually. To them, Jesus said, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”* Thus, my definition of darkness is this: darkness is the place where people cannot see the light, where the sinners do not repent, and where God’s kingdom does not reign in their hearts. To them Jesus became the light: the light that gives life, hope, and love. When we have Jesus, we do have eternal life, living hope, and His love.

While Christians are called out of darkness, Christians can suffer in this world as the Books of Peter were written for suffering Christians. Apostle Peter helped them to overcome their suffering by teaching them their identity as God’s chosen people. While we declare the ultimate victory in Christ who gave us life, as we live in our temporary bodies with our sinful nature, we often fail and are under the power of darkness.

I thought about my darkness. Now, my wife and I will move to Dallas, Texas in two weeks. I will start my new job there as a Patent Examiner in the United State Patent and Trademark Office. We have a plan to have a joint worship service there with one of the scattered house churches. However, many things are not certain. The job has a 1-year probationary period where my performance will be evaluated bi-weekly. The campus we want to serve is huge and we will be a single house church there because the other family is near another University. My wife also has a health issue. We will miss many coworkers and families in New York who showed us a lot of love and prayed for us persistently.

However, I found that worrying does not help me to prepare me for a new mission field; instead it could lead me in a destructive way. I had to meditate on how God called me and led me. He has been leading me faithfully, helping me to see His wonderful light. God was so gracious to me. By God’s grace, I studied in a Post-Bacc program at Columbia, and then in a PhD program at City College. Each time, I applied to only 1 or 2 schools, both in NY, to remain near Columbia’s campus to serve growing Bible students. Many post-doctoral and doctoral candidates were fired in my PhD program. But I was the one who would spend my time to prepare Bible study, believing that I only needed God’s miracle and grace. God blessed my time there and I graduated with my doctoral degree. I also received a job offer even before my graduation. It was a job I have been praying for because of its flexible working schedule. Surely, many things happened during my Graduate studies. My father passed away from cancer in 2012. Recently Karen experienced a miscarriage. Then I felt I was seeing a sky. There is a cloud; there is a wind; there is sunshine; there is a storm. However, there is God as well who is working. As Philippians 1:27 says, which reads, *“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel”* I cannot expect what would happen to me, but I have to conduct myself in a manner worthy of the gospel. Whether Jesus comes near me or hears about me, he had to know that I stand firm and become a man of faith. In the end, it is not about what I achieve but it is about what kind of being I become through different trials and blessings. I pray that I may seek Him wherever He leads me each moment. I pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Let’s look at verse 9 again. It reads, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that *you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light*.” Apostle Peter said, we are called out of darkness into His wonderful light. By knowing our identity as God’s chosen people, then what kind of praises can we declare?

First, we can declare that we have life because of Jesus. In John 10:10, Jesus said, *“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. (NASB)”* Because of Jesus, the living Stone, we can live our lives fully and abundantly through him even in a moment of suffering. I remember someone’s word. He said if you want to find Jesus in the Bible, you have to find where the suffering is. Indeed, Jesus suffered for us and understands our sufferings. He was betrayed by His disciples and abandoned by His followers. He carried the burden of the sins of the world. He was falsely accused and rejected by Jewish leaders. He was mocked, beaten, and crucified. His body was pierced. He tasted death in the end. However, he became our life when he was raised from the dead. Thank God that we have life through Jesus.

We can declare that we can come to our heavenly Father without shame. Because God bought us to make us His special possession by sacrificing His own son, we can come to God without fear. (Ephesians 3:12) John 3:18 reads *“He who believes in Him is not condemned.”* Our heavenly Father does not condemn us; instead He listens to our crying. Psalm 145:18 reads, “The Lord is near to all who call upon Him.” Thank God that we can call His name when we need Him the most in our suffering. God is near when we cry out to Him. Thus, let us continue to offer our spiritual sacrifices by praying for others as well.

Lastly, we can declare that we have the light in the darkness. We might face suffering in this world. But we can taste the light of life in this life. John 8:12 reads “He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life.” This light of life has power to change our life. Jesus said *"No one lights a lamp and hides it in a clay jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, they put it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light.” (Luke 8:16)* Because of this, in our suffering and in the moment of darkness, we have to shine this light in this world.

To suffering Christians, the author of Psalms confessed about God’s care in Psalm 56:8, Let us read this verse. “You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book.” (NLT) God cares so much about every detail of your life and my life that He keeps track of all your emotions, thoughts, and feelings. That means, what you are going through is so important to Him that he records every sorrow and collects every tear. Why? Because God loves you so much. He wants to restore everything. He wants to heal every single pain. He wants you to know that He is working even today building a spiritual house with having Jesus as Cornerstone and having you as living stones. You are His special possession. By knowing that we are being built into a spiritual house, let us claim that we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people belonging to God.