

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A Theology of Martyrdom, Pt 4

Acts 7:51-60

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PowerPoint Presentation included: none

SermonAudio Blurb: Persecution and martyrdom are frightening for many as they see the many changes occurring in America today. What once seemed so far away is now quite near and some are even now experiencing a level of persecution they never imagined. But this is not something new. The bible is clear about it and its certainty. So how ought the Christian view this? That is the goal of this message. In this second message we will consider what the Christian is to do in light of the certainty of persecution.

I. Introduction.

- A. Read 51-60.
- B. We come to the final principle on this basic theology of martyrdom.
- C. Why this series?
 - 1. First, it is part of the passage we are examining in Acts 7. Stephen is the very first martyr of the Christian Church.
 - 2. Second, martyrdom is something most of us have heard about but we have not seen in any real way. This causes us to treat it as a theoretical point rather than reality.
 - 3. Third, with the increasing paganization of our nation the ability to worship and obey our Lord shall become more difficult without experiencing persecution.
- D. Three principles so far:
 - 1. First, we should not be surprised by it as it is promised by God.
 - 2. Second, we are not to fret over the possibility of persecution but be busy being faithful to our duties as believers.
 - 3. Third, we must remember that the persecution is not merely from other people but it finds its roots in Satan, our adversary.
- E. Passages like Acts 7 remind us of this great battle that is constantly unfolding all around us.

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1. As Paul said in Ephesians 6, we don't wrestle with flesh and blood but with the spiritual forces of evil.
2. But this battle is also centered upon the spread and proclamation of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. At its core is a call to come, believe, follow and submit to Jesus as Lord of all.

F. So with that in mind, let us consider the last principle regarding Martyrdom.

II. A Basic Theology of Martyrdom.

A. Principle #4: Persecution and martyrdom are a means to reveal the genuineness of one's faith.

1. Matthew 13:1-23.
 - a. Initial growth is not a proof of the genuineness of your faith.
 - b. Only those who are born anew by the Spirit endure and grow and bear the fruit of one who loves God.
 - c. Jesus said in this way in Matthew 7, *“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it”* (7:13-14).
 - d. The path we walk is a path littered with the souls of those who counted the cost of following Jesus and said it was not worth it. May the listener take heed.
2. 1 Peter 1:6-9.
 - a. The book of 1 Peter is so helpful to us as the events we are living in begin to surround and affect us. Last message I ended the sermon in John 17 where Jesus was describing us as being not “of the world” but also that we are still “in the world” nonetheless.
 - (1) Notice vs 1-2 as they set forth the theme of this important letter. (Read) There are a lot of words in these two verses and they can clutter up your mind that you actually miss the

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main point. But if you strip away all of the extraneous words and look at the core of the sentence you see this: “Peter, to the chosen/elect who live as strangers/alien to obey Jesus Christ.” Everything else simply enlarges upon this core point.

- (2) And in this simple opening sentence we have the theme of the letter. We are chosen by God unto salvation from His wrath. But this also changes our relation to this age in a radical way. We now view it as a foreign land and not our home and therefore conduct ourselves properly, as citizens of a different land or kingdom.
 - (3) The rest of the book is simply telling you what that looks like.
- b. So Peter starts this letter with a description of the Christian’s inheritance in verse 4 and their salvation in verse 5.
- c. And from there he immediately transitions into suffering. Why? Because it is likely going to be a part of our life. In fact, to the degree you live a life that is not in conformity to this age but in conformity to the next, suffering shall be yours.
- (1) “In this” points us to the previous verses.
 - (2) Beloved, if you are not rejoicing in the midst of trials and suffering, then you have yet to grasp the reality of vss 3-5!
 - (3) “Even though now, for a little while, if necessary you have been distressed by various trials.” Let’s break that down to enjoy the things that are hidden in this verse.
 - (a) “Various trials”
 - (b) “Distressed”

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- (4) So on one hand you greatly rejoice while being greatly distressed. The distress comes from the trial and the joy comes by focusing on the promise in the end.
- (5) That is what happens in these trials, the emotions are attacked and challenged, but if you have developed deep, godly affections, then you are able to rejoice, for your affections are built upon the truths of the prior verses.
 - (a) “If necessary.”

- (b) “Even though . . .”

- i) The construction of this sentence is strongly saying that these trials are short in duration.
- ii) In fact they are emphasizing the fact that it is for only a little while. How long? Perhaps unto death, but compared to the eternity that awaits, it is but a short time.

- d. Now the testing that occurs through this suffering is that your faith would be proved genuine.

B. Now notice the future looking aspect of verse 7.

- 1. We bear up under the current trials because we are looking to our future reward when Christ comes.
- 2. We will then receive praise, glory and honor.
- 3. So how do we endure suffering and trials now? Two ways: understand the purpose and look to the future.
- 4. “Divine grace, even in the heart of weak and sinful man, is an invincible thing. Drown it in the waters of adversity, it rises more beautiful, as not being drowned indeed, but only washed: throw it into the furnace of fiery

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trials; it comes out purer, and loses nothing but the dross which our corrupts nature mixes with it.”

- C. This is all held together by the glue of the love for Christ. Notice that true faith holds on to its source (8ff).
1. You see, when you have the faith that you yourself generate you find that it will ultimately fail, because it finds itself focused on what **it** has done and hopes in that. Like the roots of the plant in the shallow soil. You receive the gospel with joy but the roots are in yourself, not in the God who promises. And persecution burns it all away.
 2. But the true faith of God that is a gift to us does not fail. Your faith is actually strengthened in those desperate times.
 3. Romans 8:17.
 - a. All want to call themselves “children of God.” All desire to be considered “saved.” But the title and term belongs to those who suffer with Christ.
 - b. “No Christian is in a healthy state of mind who is not prepared for trouble and persecution.

He that expects to cross the troubled waters of this world, and to reach heaven with wind and tide always in his favor, knows nothing yet as he ought to know. We never can tell what is before us in life. But of one thing we may be very sure – we must carry the cross if we would wear the crown. Let us grasp this principle firmly, and never forget it.” J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John, Vol. 3*, p. 148)
 - c. Notice the idea of fear in vs 15. What brings this fear? It is born out of a life that is marked by consistent inconsistency/unfaithfulness to a life in Jesus Christ (12-13).
 - d. What is the answer? Vs 18.

III. Conclusion.

- A. Only the power of saving grace enables a Christian to endure to the end.
- B. In the death of a believer Satan is, in a sense, trampled under foot again. And this event is repeated every time one is faithful to the end.

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1. Satan hates the death of a believer for it is a testimony of God's power over Satan. But the bible tells us, "*Precious in the sight of the LORD Is the death of His godly ones*" (Psalm 116:15).
 2. In the willingness to raise a fist in rejection to the lures of this age and the god of this age, the martyr and the patient sufferer reveals the true glory of the gospel. They show, not in word only, but in deed, in blood and tears, that their hope is in their Lord Jesus Christ.
 3. Peter talks of this in his first letter where he says that as we suffer for our faith it creates opportunities to give an answer to those watching as to our hope. Persecution and the threat of death wipe away the false hopes of this age leaving only that which is eternal in which to find refuge and rest.
- C. The world is a prison filled that entraps us with its many vices and temptings. Over time we lose sight of the walls that are erected by sin and death and we forget that there is a vast new world on the outside. We trudge in circles around those walls just existing. Like fools we amass small troves of so-called treasure that cannot bring freedom. We fight and hate and murder and lie to keep our little life alive.
1. But the gospel opens our eyes to the glory of the land beyond, where sin and death are no more. Where the true God reigns and has cast away every enemy.
- D. Polycarp, a well known Bishop as well as a disciple of the Apostle John died at the hands of the Roman government.
1. He was bound and burned at the stake but even that was not enough. As he burned they repeatedly stabbed him with a spear.
 2. His crime? He refused to burn a small bit of incense to the Roman emperor. He was 86.
 3. His final words are famously recorded, "Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior? You threaten me with a fire that burns for a season, and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the wicked."
 4. But what stands out with this death, and countless other ones over the centuries, is how they were willing to do so. They did not seek it, but they were convinced that the bible was true. And the bible declares that God is in control and therefore this suffering is no accident.

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5. Here is what was written by the person who chronicled Polycarp's martyrdom. It is to the people over whom Polycarp had served as bishop.
 - a. "We wish you, brethren, all happiness, while you walk according to the doctrine of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; with whom be glory to God the Father and the Holy Spirit, for the salvation of His holy elect, after whose example the blessed Polycarp suffered, following in whose steps may we too be found in the kingdom of Jesus Christ!" (*Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Ch. 22)
 - b. Not a word of fear or to flee. Not a word of despair or of bitterness. But a desire that they be happy. But this happiness was not the type that this age with its passing fancies can produce, but for a moment. But the happiness found in the knowledge that they knew God and, more importantly, God knew them and had saved them through His beloved Son.

Benediction

May our God cause you all to not stumble and to make you stand one day in His presence filled with joy. May God's Spirit hold you in His mighty hand until that day of redemption. And may you find your hope, joy and life in His Son, Jesus Christ the Lord. To Him be the glory and majesty and dominion for all time. Amen