

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 2

Acts 7:51-60

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PowerPoint Presentation included: none

Sermon Audio 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 Acts 7:51-60.
- B. We are studying the book of Acts.
 - 1. Often known as the Acts of the Apostles, but really it is the Acts of the Holy Spirit.
 - 2. Jesus, while on earth, told His disciples that when He left He would send the Holy Spirit and that it was good that He leave so that this would happen.
 - 3. And without the Holy Spirit the Church would not exist. What makes a person part of the Church is that the Spirit has made you alive in Jesus Christ. It is called a new birth.
 - 4. And you would not hear and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ (explain) without the Spirit opening your eyes and heart to believe it and find salvation.
 - 5. And you would not endure the promise of suffering and persecution without the sustaining grace of the Spirit who seals all true believers until the end so that they persevere and do not fall away.
- C. This is what we find in Acts 7—a clear working of the Holy Spirit in various aspects.
 - 1. We see it in the conviction experienced by Stephen’s hearers.
 - 2. He takes truth, which is His truth, and brutally applies it to us.

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3. But we see also the powerful way the Holy Spirit makes a person new.
4. In that moment as the final stones were hurled at his bruised and broken body we see true faith on display. A faith that is not the product of the mind of man, but one that is from the Holy Spirit.
 - a. We all have faith in something.
 - b. As the writer of Hebrews put it, *“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need”* (Hebrews 4:14-16).
 - c. This man, at the point of extreme danger, in vs 56 looks and sees His Savior standing beside the Father. Such a mystery! Such a vision! And this comes only because of the Holy Spirit whose job it is to reveal Jesus to poor sinners. And Stephen, even as he is dying, cannot help but point all who are there to see Jesus.
 - d. But they did not see and believe.
 - e. No declaration to Jesus to remember his own good efforts. Only a cry to Jesus to receive him.
 - f. This is a man, born of the Spirit, who availed himself even to the final moments of his earthly life to God’s sustaining grace in his time of need.
- D. We saw together that persecution is something to be expected and over which we should never be surprised.
- E. Today we will consider the next principle related to persecution and martyrdom. If God has ordained suffering and persecution because of our faith in Jesus Christ, then how are we to respond?

II. A Basic Theology of Martyrdom.

- A. Principle #2: Our task is not to fret over the possibility of persecution and death but to be found faithful to our task.
 1. Fretting is a word we don’t use much today but it is a good one. It is actually connected to anger and being consumed. It speaks of being eaten away inwardly.

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- a. Fretting is the lifestyle of those who only have this life and this age in which to live. Look around you and see if I do not speak the truth.
- b. The threat of persecution or suffering is a sure way for many to begin to fret.
- c. Psalm 37 picks up this idea of fretting, but now it is the king telling himself and all of Israel to not fall into this all-to-easy pit.
 - (1) vs 1 fretting leads to wanting to emulate the ways of this age. But (vs 2) they are destined to pass away.
 - (2) Instead we are called to practice vss 3-8.
 - (3) But woven in all of this are promises from God.
 - (a) vs 4 He will give you the desires of your heart.
 - (b) vs 5 He will guide you in your way.
 - (c) vs 6 He will bring forth your righteousness and show you to be true and right in the end.
 - (4) To fret always results in action—but it is wrong action, wrong decisions because the motivation is wrong.
 - (a) When you fret you forget God’s sovereignty over all things.
 - (b) When you fret it is you and your ways that become central.
 - (c) *“For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls”* (1 Peter 2:21-25).

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- (5) David reminds himself, and us, in vss 9-10, that in a little while all shall be made right.
- d. So what do we do instead of fretting? It is described to “cultivate faithfulness.” Other translations say, “befriend faithfulness” or “maintain your integrity.”
- 2. 2 Timothy 3:12-14.
 - a. Quick review of what was said in part 1.
 - b. Vs 14 is our focus.
 - (1) This term, *meno*, means to abide or to remain. Here it is in strong contrast to the false believers who both lie and are lied to in vs 13.
 - (2) The answer is always the same for a Christian. Learn truth and remain in that truth. Learn the Word of God well and then do not stray from the Word of God.
- 3. When we come to grips that suffering and persecution is something to expect and to be faithful in enduring then we can prepare for
 - a. But simply consider the commands we briefly saw in Psalm 37: trust, do, dwell, cultivate, delight, commit, and again, trust. Then picking up in vs 7: rest, wait, don't fret, cease, forsake, and again, do not fret. Isn't this list enough for most of us to be busy considering?
 - b. Let me encourage those in community groups to go around and have everyone contribute to what practical ways it would look like to do these commands. Do this at your home or in whatever discipleship relationship you might have.
 - c. *Do good.*
 - d. *Cultivate faithfulness.*

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e. *Commit your ways to the Lord.*

f. *Delight yourself in the Lord.*

III. Conclusion.

A. Jesus, speaking to men who were claiming to believe in Him, said this in John 8:31: *“If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”*

1. True, saving faith starts and ends with what the bible says about Jesus and what He has done and shall do as the righteous judge of all creation.
2. But true, saving faith also produces a stable, abiding/remaining in what the bible says. And as you learn the Word of God and then learn to abide in it, you begin to see how truly free you are through Jesus Christ.
3. But consider what knowing the truth and being made free in the truth of Jesus Christ does in relation to persecution.

4. Martin Luther said this, “Wherever faith is genuine, it cannot hold its tongue; it would rather suffer death. Such faith will also confess God’s Word before tyrants. To be sure, it will encounter all sorts of trials and temptations from the devil, as the martyrs amply experienced” (*Luther’s Works*, 22:393).

B. Here is what is so strange about what I am speaking about. We are called to be like Israel, when it was led away into captivity. We are in enemy territory and are called to be a blessing to them. In Jeremiah 29:7 it says, *“Seek the welfare of the*

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city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.”

- C. What freezes so many of us is nothing more than a fear of what might happen if we were to obey some aspect of our Lord’s commands.
1. But you cannot let the fear of opposition and hurt be the basis of obedience. The bible is clear that through many tribulations one shall enter the Kingdom of God. Only those who endure to the end shall be saved.
 2. So instead of worrying about what might happen simply lower your head to the task at hand. Be a godly husband or wife. A faithful employer or employee. Obey your parents, submit to the authorities, pay your taxes. Honor those over you and speak good and right things. Above all seek to honor the Lord in all your dealings and accept what comes as coming from God.
 3. And if the waves of hate rush over you, you will find that like Stephen, you will be fine.

Benediction

May you go in the love of the Father resting in the fulness of His grace. May you walk in hope through the rich calling in which you have in Jesus Christ our Lord. May your power not be found in you but through the presence of the Holy Spirit. And may we all continue to grow together in true unity.