

Pastor Tom Mortenson

Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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The Satraps' Execution

Daniel 6:21-24

Prayer: *Father God, again, I just thank you for the fact that you are our Savior. What a Savior indeed you are. Father, it's because of the gift of your Son that we are able to come before you, and I thank you for the privilege we have of doing just that this morning. And Lord, again as we reach that point where we are going to be offering up worship that consists of opening up your book and listening to your Holy Spirit speak, I pray that you would give us the presence of your Spirit as we look once again into the book of Daniel. May your Spirit be present with us, enable us to take in the words that you've given us and to again make them of permanent value, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, when we last saw Daniel, he was at the bottom of a lions' den telling Darius the king that he was indeed alive and unharmed. This is Daniel 6:21, it says: *Then Daniel said to the king, "O king, live forever! My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm."*

Then the king was exceedingly glad, and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

Now this was extraordinarily good news for Darius who had been up all night just racked with guilt over the death sentence that he had imposed on Daniel. It was also extraordinarily bad news for the satraps who had arranged for the king to be forced into throwing Daniel into the lions' den. And this is what *Daniel 6:24* says about them. It says: *And the king commanded, and those men who had maliciously accused Daniel were brought and cast into the den of lions -- they, their children, and their wives.* Now there were 120 satraps and if you add wives and children, my guess is you had maybe 3- or 400 others, all who were thrown into this lions' den to lions who just the night before were as vicious as pussy cats who now were as vicious as ravenous lions. And I looked at that and I wanted to just stop and park there for a minute because it's remarkably easy to gloss over words that describe not just men, but women and children being ripped to pieces by ravenous beasts. But there it is right there in the scripture and it says: *And before they reached the bottom of the den, the lions overpowered them and broke all of their bones in pieces.*

I thought this would be an appropriate time to just stop for a second, take a little side road. I just want to take the opportunity here at this point of disturbing violence to address a false narrative that I hear frequently stated today, and that is that there's violence in the Bible and there's violence in the Koran, and basically they're two sides of the same coin; and that the difference between the god of Islam and the God of the Bible is minimal. Without going into any great depths, I want to explain this morning why this simply is not true and I want to do that by pointing out one point of divergence between the Koran's violence and the violence that you do find in the pages of scripture. And here's why. The Bible contains the history of God's dealing with his chosen people Israel, and this is a nation, a whole nation that God grew out of one man named Abraham. And God made it very clear that he didn't choose Israel because of any peculiar or superior qualities that they had. He said this about Israel in *Deuteronomy 7:6*. It says: *"The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of*

Egypt." What God did is he called one man, said I'm going to make a nation out of you and you are going to bless the entire world because out of this nation the Messiah would come. So we follow this journey, and as we follow the journey in the scripture, we see God treating Israel uniquely not because they were better, not because they were more holy or more loyal or anything like that, but simply because he had announced that this was the people that God was going to fix his love on. And so in the Old Testament we see Israel go through various wars with the peoples that surround them and we see God at work protecting them. We see Joseph sold into slavery as a young man, falsely imprisoned then rising to the second most important position in all of Egypt, and we see that all of this happened and all that God is doing as Joseph's explaining to his brothers what God was doing at the very end of his career when they knew that they were in deep trouble because now he was the prime minister and they were on the other end of the scale. They knew and they understood that their wickedness might be something that they would be called to account for, and as Joseph is explaining to them their wickedness, he says that God used them as a tool, and he says to his brothers in *Genesis 50:20*, he says: "*As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.*" Understand, the good that God superintended through Joseph was to keep the nation of Israel alive so Jesus could enter

the world in the flesh.

And so we follow the history and we see after Joseph, we see again Israel enslaved in Egypt and then we see God miraculously freeing this entire nation, he takes the whole nation out of Egypt and he tells them essentially I'm going to feed you, I'm going to clothe you, I'm going to protect you, I'm going to live in your midst. And that's good news and bad news. God says because I am not at all like you. I am holy. And so he tells this nation you're going to receive great privileges and you will also have very heavy responsibilities. He says to them, you will do exactly as I say, and if you step out of line because you are different, because you are set apart, because you are holy, because you are an example to the whole world, if you do step out of line, I just might kill you. And we know that God did just that on numerous occasions. I mean, once there was a young man who decided that he was going to test God's law, God said do no work on the Sabbath. This young man decided well, I'm going to go out on the Sabbath and gather some sticks and they find the young man, and they bring him to a place of judgment, they ask Moses, "What do we do," Moses asks God, and God says in *Numbers 15:30*: *"The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp."* We look at that and we're offended, we say this is incredibly harsh, I mean, he was picking up sticks. And so we ask was this harsh?

Well, certainly it was harsh. We also ask was it necessary? You ask yourself, well, do you think anybody else was going to challenge God's rule at that point? I mean, God was not above making an example of his people, that as unique as they were in terms of the privileges that they had, so also was their responsibilities great, and to tamper with that responsibility could very well cost you your life. And God blessed extravagantly and God punished sometimes swiftly and without mercy. But it was always to make a point with his people.

Now once again, you have to look here at the big picture. The big picture -- I speak of this all the time, the big picture goes back to this idea of the fact that we are at war, that there's a war going on between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. And understand, there's the prince of this world who rules this world, and that prince was determined to keep the Lord of light, to keep the Messiah, to keep Jesus Christ, the one who would come from Israel, he was determined to keep that person from ever breathing a breath. So from the start, Satan's at work trying to eliminate the group that Jesus is going to come from, and that's Israel. And God is at work from the start making sure that that's not going to happen. God either naturally or supernaturally gave Israel the means not only to survive but to triumph and conquer and sometimes that involved the wholesale slaughter of Israel's enemies. There's

no avoiding the violence that that required. And in addition, God also used Israel as his hand of judgment applied to countries whose wickedness had reached such a level that God decided to take them out completely. Once again, our 21st century sensibilities are offended by all of this, and we think how in the world could God wipe out whole people groups, that includes women, that includes children, how could he do this? Well, prior to the creation of ISIS, I didn't really sense that it was possible for entire -- for an entire people group to be so corrupt that they would represent an existential threat to the rest of the world that surrounded them. But I mean, we've been subject to what ISIS has been doing for a number of years now and having seen 9-year-olds cutting off the heads of people and seeing 3-year-olds all dressed in black and chanting "death to infidels," I understand where it's possible. And to add to that, you understand that ISIS is sexually very puritanical. Imagine a people group that is as monstrous as ISIS and sexually debauched beyond measure. Such were the Amorites and the Canaanites whom God utterly destroyed through Israel. And so we look at this and we say well, was God cruel, was God monstrous to remove these people? One thing we've learned about ISIS is that by failing to contain them first in Iraq, then in Syria, then in Libya, we've seen them spread like a cancer. And we understand, we see now their effects in Belgium, in France, and in Florida. So it may sound harsh and it may sound cruel to say that they, that ISIS

as a people group need to be completely wiped out, every last one of them. But it makes a lot more sense to me now than it did only five years ago. And understand something about God's patience with these wicked people groups, you know, God once told Abraham that it would take 400 years of waiting before the Amorites who were a particularly wicked group, before they finally tipped the scales and warranted complete and utter annihilation. In other words God waited for four centuries until their wickedness became so great that the judgment of God accomplished through Israel that that would be appropriate. I mean think about that. God waited 400 years for their wickedness to ripen until it demanded judgment. This is how God put it in *Genesis 15:13*, he said: *Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."* Well judgment eventually came to the Amorites, and it was brutal, it was without mercy, but it was ultimately just.

So hence you have this -- these scriptures, particularly in the Old

Testament that record great violence and great bloodshed in the pursuit of Israel's enemies. And it is these scriptures that are used to suggest that Islam and Christianity are basically two sides of the same coin. But all of the violence and all of the passages that are quoted conflating in the scriptures and the Koran, they miss one very specific point. You see, God did set aside specific sanction for a specific time, for a specific group of people and that is the historical Jews. And those sanctions were designed to keep a certain people group alive in the face of unremitting hostility from the god of this world who knew that out of these very people the Messiah would come who would crush his kingdom. Once the Messiah was born, the need for those protections and sanctions ended, and so did the violence associated with protecting the birth of this Messiah.

Now on the other hand, the Koran's violence and sanction is open-ended. They are not rooted in one specific time. In fact, they are open-ended and they apply to any and all people who don't submit to their will and rule. They are directed at all unbelievers and infidels and that includes any Muslims who don't see it the way they see it. And rather than ending their violence at some appointed time, they now apply it with even more fervor today. You know, moderate Muslims insist that Jihad or "the struggle" is spiritual. They say this is a spiritual struggle,

it's not physical. But it doesn't jibe with their holy book because their holy book makes lots of categorical statements enjoining the people to commit acts of violence and terror on any and all who don't believe. Koran 8:12 says this, it says: "I will cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieve. Therefore strike off their heads and strike off every fingertip of them." That's hardly psychological. That's hardly spiritual. Koran 5:33 says: "The punishment of those who wage war against Allah and His messenger, and strive to make mischief in the land is only this, that they should be murdered or crucified or their hands and their feet should be cut off on opposite sides or they shall be imprisoned; this shall be a disgrace for them in this world, and in the hereafter they shall have a grievous chastisement." You can't spiritualize that. I mean, I don't see how you could make it into something other than the violence it is. Koran 9:29 says: "Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth (even if they are) of the People of the Book until they pay the Jizya and the willing submission, and feel themselves subdued." Once again this is an open-ended command to fight with anyone who doesn't agree with Islam until they pay a tax or until they willingly submit. And it is these kind of scriptures that ISIS the license to kill, plunder, and destroy any and anyone who does not agree with their understanding

of the Koran, and unfortunately they have the Koran to back them up. See, the fact is this: There is violence in the Old Testament and there's violence in the Koran, but the similarities stop right there. The Bible's violence was primarily to protect and enable God's chosen people to survive long enough to produce the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The Koran's violence is part and parcel of the vision that Muhammad had for the entire world. It was a world that was to be conquered by the visible use of force and terror until everyone submits to its rule. And anyone who can only see the Bible and the Koran as similar does so in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

To bring it back to Daniel 6, well the account that God gives us in Daniel 6, it doesn't shy away from a violent description of an awful execution that included men, women and children torn to pieces in a lions' den. We can't give God credit for shutting the lions' mouths for Daniel's sake and not also give him the responsibility for opening those same lions' mouths not just for the guilty satraps but for their wives and for their children, even though it was the law of the land and a mark of their culture. God could have kept the lions' mouths shut but he didn't. And so the governors and the families learned the hard way what Hebrews declares in *Hebrews 10:31*. It says: *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.* Now the satraps and their wives

and their children discovered that in the worst possible way. But you know for most folks today, that's today, that thought, that fear, that's not even a passing fancy. The fearfulness of the wrath of God, that is something that is almost completely wasted on those who don't know God. I mean from the satraps in Daniel's day to your neighbor today, they simply have no fear. Little did the satraps realize that they were in fact plotting their own deaths when they decided to go after God's beloved Daniel. They had no fear of Daniel's God at all, and they had no fear in spite of all of the different miracles that God did, it was a list as long as your arm of miracles that God did through Daniel, I mean, there was the miraculous diet, there was the miraculous dreams and their interpretations, the astounding miracle of the blast furnace that left Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego untouched, but none of that seemed to make any difference to the satraps as they plotted Daniel's demise. It seems that they never considered that if they "bit" Daniel, then perhaps Daniel's God might "bite" them back. And I would say that if there's anything that characterizes folks' attitude towards God today, it would be that same sort of absolute unwarranted fearlessness. I'm convinced that all of the dire warnings that are in scripture -- and there are plenty of them -- are not really for the sake of your friends and neighbors who don't know Christ; they're really there for us. I mean, those who do know Christ.

You know, fire and brimstone is a style of preaching that's kind of no longer in vogue, it's a style that used to emphasize the terrible consequences of ignoring or refusing the gospel. And preachers would explain the horrors of hell in terms of its burning, in terms of its outer darkness, in terms of its shattering eternality. The most famous fire and brimstone sermon of all time was Jonathan Edwards' *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* in which Edwards describes unbelievers as unknowingly hanging by a thread above the very pit of hell suspended there by a God who absolutely loathed their sinfulness and rebellion. Think of what would happen if you had that kind of sermon today. People would be bored. What's next? They'd either be bored or they'd be full of derision and they would be thinking that the author of this sermon is some kind of psychological basket case. And the reason why is because everybody knows God is love. I mean, if folks remember anything from scripture, it's *John 3:16*, right? *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.* There's a problem with *John 3:16* and it's not 16, it's not 17; it's 18. See, there's a problem if you read the whole passage. If you just keep reading what God says in the scripture, when you get to verse 17, you come to this, it says: *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* Wonderful. So far so good. Jesus came into the

world as the Lamb of God who had come to take away the sins of the world. But that was then, and this is now. Jesus is coming back and he's not coming back as a lamb; he's coming back as a lion. And God says of his Son in the very next verse, verse 18: *"Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."*

I can tell you what the scary part of that verse is, the scary part are those two words that say "condemned already." What does that mean, condemned already? It means the vast majority of our friends and neighbors who think that condemnation only happens to truly bad people are mistaken. And if they're religiously inclined, they think this happens only to bad people who actively reject the gospel of Christ. But that's not what God is saying. That's not what he is saying when he uses the phrase "condemned already." God is not describing what happens to people who actively reject the gospel. He's not talking about American Atheists or the Freedom From Religion Foundation, those people that demand that God be removed from every vestige of public life. He's not talking about those who aggressively deride the gospel. He's speaking of something far more subtle than that. God is describing people who may be decent and honorable and sweet and lovely people who also quite naturally do not believe in the name of the only Son of God.

And these folks would never, never see them self as God's enemies. But that's the way God sees them. They're not rabble-rousers, these are not bitter atheists, these are your friends, these are your neighbors, these are your associates who simply have not found the idea of God compelling enough to warrant anything more than just a minor passing interest. What matters to them is this world and not the kingdom. This is what God says in *Philippians 3:18*, he says: *For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.* What God is saying is that these folks, because of unbelief, are condemned already. And nobody's going to be more surprised at that condemnation than those who are condemned already.

Now for these folks there's some kind of cosmic disconnect about the fearfulness of the wrath of God that we saw that the satraps had to face. We're not talking about the wicked plotters from ancient history in far away lands, we're talking about our friends, our relatives, our acquaintances, our neighbors. The reason why God's warning about his fearfulness appears not written in the sky but written in the pages of his book is because only those who know God understand the reality behind that fearfulness. Those who don't know God have their minds literally blindfolded by the god of

this world. I mean 2 Corinthians 4:4 says: *The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.* And we know the god of this world is very content to have you and me so fully blinded that we genuinely believe that God is whoever we think he is.

I've always been fascinated by animal behavior, you know, when I graduated from college, I decided that I wanted to make that my life's work and so I went to graduate school in behavioral biology. And that was a fairly new discipline about 40 years ago. It consisted basically in studying animal behavior patterns and just drawing conclusions about those patterns, how these different animals respond in different circumstances. And believe it or not, the group of animals that I was fascinated with 40 years ago -- and my wife will attest to this -- I wanted to study sharks. That was the big thing for me. So I went to San Francisco State because it was on the coast and I could study sharks there. I wound up never finishing my degree but that's another story for another time. But if you're like me, you're fascinated by sharks. The fact that Shark Week just ended on the Discovery Channel, I watched all of that. It points to the fact that people are fascinated by these creatures. And what folks are learning when they study these animals is that if you do study them, you begin to see patterns of

behavior that enables you to predict how they're going to behave under certain circumstances. Now you can do that if you're studying sharks. Problem is people think you can do that if you're studying God. And they don't even use the right study sources. The right study source is the scripture alone in its entirety. But here's how we study God. We study God by studying other people, and then we amplify what we see in other people and we just make the assumption that God is just another version of amplified humanity. That's a large and classic mistake. There is a reason why God says don't do that. It's because if you start out with a faulty premise, you can't hope but come up with a faulty conclusion. And a premise based on an understanding of God by understanding us is faulty to the extreme. There's reason why God says in *Proverbs 3:5: Trust in the LORD with all of your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.* It's because our understanding will never, never take us to God. I mean you could study God for a million centuries, you still would not come close to getting him figured out. Just think of it in relation to sharks, I mean, we spent the last 40 years studying sharks and we admit now that we've gained a tiny percentage of understanding about who they are and what they do. And if you watched Shark Week at all, you understand that scientists are constantly being amazed by what they're learning about these creatures. But understand something, we're the ones doing the studying. We're the smart

ones; they're the dumb ones. Now if you reverse things and you looked at sharks and they spent 40 years studying us, do you think they would arrive at any new insights as to who we are and what we do? As ludicrous as that is, my guess is a bull shark studying us for 40 years has a far greater chance of figuring us out that we will ever have of figuring God out that way. And it's not a matter of smart ones and dumb ones and who is studying who. It's a matter of the infinite uncreated all-encompassing light who spoke the universe into being by the sheer power of his will, of him being figured out by a puny people who still haven't figured out global warming. Really? You really think you're going to figure God out?

A few years back we were having a dinner party with a number of young people that were friends with some of our kids, these were folks that had just graduated from college. And in the course of the dinner the conversation turned to God and there was one young woman in particular who constantly interjected the conversation with a statement of "Well, my God is..." And it was amazing because her God, she would say, "My God is kind." "My God is tolerant." "My God is unbelievably open-minded." And she kept on going on and on like that until I felt compelled to ask her a couple questions about her God. I asked her, I said, "How do you know that you have not spun your God out of your own head?" And what I said to her, I said, "Katy, what if God doesn't give a fig

for what you think about who he is and what he does, and what if he doesn't give a fig about what I think of who he is and what he does because who he is and what he does is not connected at all to what you and I think?" I told her if I was going to make up my own God, I would make up something very similar to what she had described as her God but how would I know it wasn't just a product of my imagination? See, I told her that I really have to wrestle with the God of the Bible because there's a lot about who God claims he is in the Bible that clashes with the God that I would make up if I was going to use one out of my own imagination. If I was going to invent a God, I'd have those satraps face that punishment that they extend to Daniel but I never would have killed the women and children. I just wouldn't have done that. But you see, I'm not God. I don't think like God. I don't respond like God. And in fact God, tells me over and over again that he doesn't think or act like we do. He says in *Isaiah 55:8*, he says: *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

I think it was Tim Keller who said that if everything about the God you worship lines up precisely with the thoughts that are in your head, then it's highly likely that the reason for that is because your God sprung out of the thoughts that are in your head. And if

there's nothing at all about God that offends or challenges or mystifies you, well then you have two choices: Either your ways really are his ways or you've made up your own God. My guess is the satraps thought they had God figured out pretty as well in spite of mountains of evidence to the contrary. No doubt they just trusted what seemed right to them and it cost them dearly. I cringe when people say you just got to trust your heart or you just got to trust and listen to your conscience, because hearts and consciences are not trustworthy. They can lead you to hell as easily as they can lead to you heaven. God has a very brief comment on the value of listening to that inner voice that seems so right. He says in *Proverbs 14:12*: *There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.* And so if the gospel itself, if Jesus Christ was God in the flesh, then he came to earth and lived this perfect life and offered that life up as a perfect sacrifice in exchange for our sin and that by faith in his sacrifice we can appropriate his righteousness and stand righteous before a holy God based on his righteousness and not our sin, if that gospel, if that seems right to you, it's not because you're more clever than anybody else, it's because God has done a powerful work in your heart. *Ephesians 2:1* says: *And you were dead in trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience -- among*

whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ -- by grace you have been saved. That's why we understand what is right, by grace alone. And if God has done that work, it is with the same expectation that he blessed Israel with. Listen to this, this is what he says in Genesis 12 about Israel. He says: "And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." See, Israel was blessed not because of something that Israel did, Israel was blessed to be a blessing. Israel is blessed to be a blessing to the entire world, and we are blessed for the exact same reason. We are blessed to be a blessing to our world.

So what is our take away from this brutal execution of the satraps and all of their families? I mean, what blessing does this impart to us that we can share with others? Well, the blessings, the blessing is this: We know for a fact that the satraps went after Daniel, and God went after the satraps. We know for a fact that the king of the universe looks upon us as he looked on Daniel, as

one of his most precious possessions. We know for a fact that we are a people bought and paid for with the price of the blood of God's own son, so there is nothing of greater value to God than our good and his glory. We know that Jesus himself said: *"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows."* Think about that for a minute. God says he knows you and me so intimately that he can tell you the exact number of hairs on your head, a task which has grown a lot easier for him for me. But God has unique story that he's planned for every single one of us and he has promised us the grace to play out that story, whether it is shutting the mouths of lions like in Daniel's case or having the grace to willingly endure your own beheading for Christ's sake, like in the case of Matthew Ayairga. This is the young man that we spoke about the last time. So now you may be thinking, okay, let me get this straight, what you're saying is God is really for me and that all of the hairs on my head are numbered but I can still get my head cut off. The answer is yeah. Yeah, that's correct. That's the way this works. You see, God looks on you and me like he looked on his own son, the same son who on our behalf was stripped naked and nailed to a cross. And for Matthew Ayairga and for all the saints who have suffered before us, for all those in the Middle East who are suffering right now, God has these

particular words. This is what he says in *Philippians 1:27*, he says: *Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.*

See, God considers it a privilege to be able to lay your life on the line for the sake of the gospel, because God knows, and we don't, the rewards that await those who do. You see, God's perfect justice is the ultimate settler of scores. And he promises that what we endure here on earth is going to result in a cosmic payback that will last forever. He says in *2 Corinthians 4:17*: *For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*

See, God looks on you and me like he looks on his own son. And whatever is done to you or me for Christ's sake, God takes personally and Jesus does as well. If you remember when Saul was out there persecuting Christians, one day he's thrown from his

horse and in a blinding light Jesus speaks to him and says: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." The fact is Jesus and Paul never met. They never met before Christ's resurrection but this meeting in particular points out that Jesus saw Paul's persecution of the entire Christian church as a direct attack on himself. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

Jesus takes the persecution of his saints personally, just like his Father took the persecution of Daniel by the satraps personally. You see, we in the west, we have traded in a God whose justice is something to be feared for this marshmallow god, this marshmallow god who only knows one side of love. But true love consists of love and hate. Both of them. I mean, a love for all that is good and a hatred for all that is evil. That's the God that all of us one day are going to face just like the Amalekites, the Canaanites, the Hittites and even the satraps did.

And here's the practical take away for us. Practically speaking, we are not facing what our brothers and sisters are facing in the Middle East in terms of genuine persecution. What we are facing is the mildest form of social and economic persecution but it is persecution nonetheless. The Christian bakers in Colorado who were sued into oblivion, the wedding venue owners in New York State who were driven out of business, they know exactly what I'm talking

about. And to the extent that you stay true to the gospel, you, too, can expect some kind of cosmic push back. *2 Timothy 3* says: *Indeed, all who desires to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*

So how do we endure it? I mean if somebody mocks you, if somebody lies about you, if somebody gets you fired, there's going to be a part of you that cries out for justice. There's going to be a part of you that wants to get even. We call that desire a desire for vengeance. God says we don't do vengeance well at all but he does it perfectly. And again, just ask the satraps. *Romans 12:17* says: *Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord.* This goes back to the idea you have in your mind of who this God is that you worship. And if the god you worship has no place for fear, no thought of vengeance, no thought of ultimate justice, well then who do you go to when you've been violated? Who do you go to when you've been abused? Who do you go when you've been treated unjustly?

Miroslav Volf is a theologian and I know I mentioned him last week, he's a theologian who lived through an incredibly brutal time of

the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. And he had some words on worshipping a God of fearful justice that are worth considering. This is from Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace*. He says this, he says: *My thesis that the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many Christians, especially theologians in the West. That's us. To the person who is inclined to dismiss it, I suggest imagining that you are delivering a lecture in a war zone. Among your listeners are people whose cities and villages have first been plundered, then burned and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit. The topic of the lecture: A Christian attitude towards violence. The thesis: We should not retaliate since God is perfect noncoercive love. Soon you would discover that it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God's refusal to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die. And as one watches it die, one will do well to reflect about many other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind.*

I love that writing. You know, you may not have understood exactly what he was saying 'cause on one reading it might go over your head, but what Volf is saying is that it is only in the pleasant confines of the safety of suburbia that people come up with this

idea of a marshmallow god who is nothing but love whatsoever. But people who have had their sisters raped and their fathers and brothers' throats slit understand something, they understand if there's no ultimate God of perfect justice who will ultimately settle the score, then I'm left with my own resources to settle the score as best I can. And often times I settle it by raping your sister and slitting your brothers' or fathers' throats, and so the cycle of violence continues. But if there is a God who will one day exact his own perfect vengeance -- and the scripture insists that there is -- then I can trust that he is able to ultimately see to it that justice prevails if not in this life, then certainly in the next. And this principle applies whether or not you're on the battlefield or simply trying to survive 21st century America. See, persecution, I think you all know it, it's coming. It's on our doorstep. It's soon going to be here. It's our job in this church to prepare all of you for it. Like I say, for us it's probably going to be the genteel form, it's not going to bare its teeth. We're going to have nothing compared to what the rest of the world goes through, but even that form we need to be prepared for. And it's our job to share the good news with an urgency that recognizes that my friend and my neighbor and my relative, he stands condemned already. And just like the satraps, they're blind to the danger they face. Daniel's faithfulness in the good times of Babylon when faith was easy, well, it made him ready to just do the next thing

when he knew that persecution and even execution was coming because he knew *it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

And so I just -- I'm going to leave you with this fact: We are nearing the end of our good times and faith is soon going to cost us in one way or another and we do well to remember these words of Jesus in conclusion. He says: *"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."* Let's pray.

Father God, again, it's a measure of the incredible blessing that we have received for years and years, even centuries, that we are so far ahead of the curve when it comes to persecution. We look around at the Middle East, we look around at Africa and China, we see people suffering horrendous things for claiming Christ as Lord and Savior. We see us having to go through a persecution that is nothing, it is a pin prick compared to that but it is real and it is growing. And so I pray that you would give us the understanding that you are a God of perfect justice, that you do vengeance far better than we do, and that we have only to trust in you and your perfect justice and trust in your -- in the power of your Holy

*Spirit to do the very next thing when we find ourselves in this
circumstance. And so I pray for that grace and I pray for that
wisdom in Jesus' name. Amen.*