



Gospel Advance – Part 1

Motivated by the Martyrs

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As kids growing up two miles from the beach, me and my friends naturally used to watch surfing videos. Back then to be honest they were called films. A lot harder to get to but we did watch them. It would always motivate us, right? We watch these guys kind of tearing up the waves here in Southern California or Hawaii and we would get motivated. I would even be motivated to take my ten-dollar garage sale surfboard and get to the bus stop and find my way on the Orange County #1 bus down to the beach and it was motivating. But there's something that we would never watch to motivate us to go surfing and that would be watching films of surfers dying. That would not get us excited about putting on wet suits and going surfing. It just sounds like odd and morbid.

And yet, as Tertullian put it in the second century about the Church, he said, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." In other words, the execution of Christians by the authorities, that is the thing that just has fueled and motivated the Church. And that's such a strange and paradoxical thing, isn't it? To see people saying that it really just motivates people to get out there when they hear of and see when it happens that Christians are executed because of their loyalty to Christ. Now, how is it that executions of Christians can in some way, at least, used to be that it would motivate Christians to live a Christian life? Well, in part, the answer is because Christianity isn't surfing. It's not surfing, it's not sailing, Christianity is not laying out by the pool, all of which are things that you hope to do without a lot of harassment if you're going to take a Sunday afternoon to do those things.

Christianity, at least according to God and the Bible, is a war. It's a battle. It's conflict. It's a kind of conflict in battle that is going to necessarily involve these things. And it's more akin, I suppose, to soldiers or Marines contemplating the reality of Memorial Day and being motivated to do what they do. That makes more sense than watching videos of surfers dying and saying, well, I want to go surfing. See, the reality of the Christian life is one that is filled with these things, opposition to a message that we are tasked in our lifetime to take to the ends of the earth, starting with your neighbors and your coworkers. That message is going to be necessarily opposed. Jesus kept warning us that there's going to be opposition in our culture. There's going to be pushback spiritually that you can't even see, a spirit that's now at work in the sons of disobedience to put it in terms of Ephesians 2. All of that is going to be pushing you back. As the gospel expands, the gates of hell are going to get more and more barbed to prevent that. And even a battle within our own flesh, our own timidity, our own fear. It's going to fight against this tasking of getting the message to our world and in our case, our generation.

That's going to be a hard thing. That's why I'm willing to go so far as to say if you have no interest in the persecuted Church or you have no interest in reading about the martyrs of Church history, it probably tells me a lot about how you understand Christianity. To the extent that you sweep those things under the rug and you think, "Well, I don't know why I would ever read about those poor guys who got slaughtered by the government or by people who were



hostile toward their beliefs. Why would I ever be interested in reading about that?" Well, it makes me think that perhaps you don't understand what this is, the Christian life. I mean, we're called to be good soldiers of Christ Jesus. We're commission with something that's going to be necessarily embroiled in conflict. And so it should be that we should look at these things that have happened in the lives of others that are happening right now in the lives of people, even increasingly so in one form or another in our own country and culture, and say that's worth looking at. That's worth studying. That's worth remembering. Because it can be the fuel for us and the preparation for us facing the challenges that we have this week.

So I want to be prepared. You and I cannot afford to be ill-prepared for the push back, the hostility, the kind of defense that the world is going to throw at us when we understand the offensive nature. I mean that in terms of the proactive nature of taking a message to this world, advancing the gospel in our age. So I want us to do what I think God would expect all of us to do, and that is to be motivated by even the martyrs of the Church, which I would propose was very much the fuel, as Tertullian put it, for the early Church. They recognized the martyrs who were dying at the hands of either the Jewish leaders as Steven was in Acts 7 or the Roman officials later through a series of chapters of persecution. They said, well, this is just doing nothing but resolving us to be unyielding about Christ.

So take your Bibles and turn to Acts Chapter 8 as we look at the response to Stephen's death. That's where we ended our study. We took eight weeks to look at Steven's sermon. We tried to piece that together to understand all that was trying to be communicated about the anticipation in the Old Testament of the coming of Christ and how those people, the generation of those Jewish leaders who were calling for Christ to be executed and handing him over to the Roman officials to be killed on the cross, that they were rejecting God's answer and solution. The savior and the king and the master was being rejected. And Stephen wasn't going to yield and bend and agree with their view of Christ. He was going to present the accurate view of Christ, and he paid with his life. And there was someone there, it says in Acts Chapter 8 verse 1 that was giving full approval to this.

So you follow along. I'll read this from the English Standard Version, Acts Chapter 8 verse 1, it says, "And Saul approved of his execution." Now, if you know your Bible, you know the basics of the book of Acts. You know, there was a man named Saul of Tarsus who we're going to learn a little bit about in verse 3 here who was persecuting the Church. But he would become in Chapter 9 through a conversion experience as God got a hold of his life and said, "Stop kicking against the goads," here. Stop persecuting me, which he meant in that case, my Church. He ends up getting converted and becoming the apostle Paul. But he was giving full approval to the death and the martyrdom of Steven.

"And there arose," middle of verse 1, "on that day a great persecution," not a small thing, not pushback, not just a few disparaging comments on social media. This was a big persecution "against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except for the apostles." They were hanging in there in Jerusalem. Now "Devout men," verse 2, "buried Steven and made great lamentations over him." And I guess I should make the point that though the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church, killing

your pastor is a bad thing. Let me just say that. Killing preachers is a bad thing. Killing spokesperson, it's a bad thing. And when it happened they felt bad. They lamented it. They grieved over it. And it was a sad, sad thing. And they took time to memorialize Steven.

But Saul wanted to see more of it, "Saul was ravaging the Church, he was entering house after house, and he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison." Now, I need to pick up the first line here of the next paragraph, if you're reading through in your Bibles, you'll see these two paragraphs separated by even a heading in most translations. But you'll see there in verse 4, it helps me understand what's going on with that crowd in verse 1 that was scattered. It says, "Now, those," that personal pronoun pointing back to verse 1, "who were scattered went about preaching the word." So even as we look at verse 4, we start to understand, well, the positive nature of what is happening in the wake of the persecution of the Church and specifically the catalytic kind of experience of having Steven be stoned to death by the leaders of Israel, all of that became something that moved the Church into these concentric circles, as we learned in Acts Chapter 1. That was Christ's commission to them, it says, "Go be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth."

So we see in verse 1, Saul, who's cheering this all on, more on that in a minute, "There arose a great persecution against the Church in Jerusalem." And the only people who are going to be left there, at least generally speaking, are the apostles who are following Christ. But all the rest of them it says "they were all scattered" throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. The last time we saw that phrase, Judea and Samaria, it was Christ telling them to "go be my witnesses." Which, by the way, is a helpful kind of linguistic understanding for us to have when we use the word martyr. Martyr is a transliteration of the word "witness," right? "Martus" is the Greek word we translate into the word "witness," but we transliterate into the word "martyr." It's like the word "Angelos" in the Greek New Testament. We just say the word "angel." But what we mean is a messenger, in that case, from heaven.

Well, here we have a witness and he's witnessing as he's dying, he's witnessing to the fact that this is true. He's witnessing to the fact that I believe this. He's witnessing to the fact that he's unyielding in his commitment to it. And even if you torture him, even if you kill him, he's not going to give up. He's not going to give in, he's not going to compromise. That's the witness of martyrdom. That's the witness of those who are suffering for their faith. And it witnesses to people like, beginning in verse 1, Saul who "approved of his execution." Augustine says, "The Church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen." Think about that. Augustine, 5th century, said "the Church owes Paul," and of course, Paul is monumental in the effect that he has in the Church. I mean, we're all still reading the letters that God used him to write to bring revelation to us, to bring God's truth to us. And here it was at the end of Stephen's life, look back at the last verse of Chapter 7. He's praying that people would be forgiven, he says, as he's falling to his knees and crying out aloud, verse 60, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And as we said when we covered that at the end of Chapter 7, there's no way for God not to hold sin against people unless they repent and put their trust in Christ. He's praying for conversions as he's testifying in his fidelity to the truth of the gospel and of Christ, and he's praying that people get it right.



And there was a guy there holding jackets, holding the cloaks of the people who were throwing rocks at Stephen until he died. And that person, in just a few short chapters we're going to read, comes to faith in Christ, becomes a monumental player in the early Church. You need to know what a radical conversion that was and what a huge impact that was. And in that sense, Augustine speaking humanly about the fact that if Stephen were not there testifying with his own life, who knows, at least humanly speaking, if we would have ever seen an apostle Paul. Look at the impact of an unyielding Christian.

If you're taking notes, I'd like you to put it down that way. Number one, you need to "Consider the Impact of Unyielding Christians." When people do not bend, what kind of strength do we derive from that? The early Church derived a lot of strength from that. Matter of fact, the thing that got Steven killed, which was him testifying about the truth, we're going to find in the end of our study this morning in verse 4, they didn't stop doing that. They did that all the more and in more places. They continued to proclaim the word, to preach the word. They were giving that message that Steven gave and it cost him his life. They weren't going to stop. They were going to redouble their efforts on this. It may look like, as some commentators have rightly put it, like they were refugees from persecution, but they were, in fact, God's missionaries, because just as Christ said, "you're going to be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria. How did they get to Judea and Samaria? Well, because of the persecution of the Church, which was ramped and lit and typified by Stephen's death. This was a catalytic event.

The impact of a life that was not going to give in to the cultural demands, which in this case was the Sanhedrin saying, "You can't preach that way about Christ. We told Christ he was wrong when he was here. We told your pastor he was wrong when he was here. Hey, Steven, we're telling you you're wrong when you're here trying to say that this Jesus was the Son of Man. We're not buying it." And Steven's not backing down. Matter of fact, he's being very clear about it and trying to quote all these Old Testament stories to verify the fact that this is indeed what Moses had prophesied, what everyone in the Old Testament was looking forward to, and I'm telling you this is it. And you need to believe it. And he ends up dying for that, but what happens? Well, Saul becomes the apostle Paul. The Church starts to become increasingly obedient to the call of Acts 1:8, which is "Go and be my witnesses in Judea and Samaria," which now they're going to enter into. I don't just think this was an act of self-preservation. If it was, they would have left Jerusalem and been quiet. They didn't leave Jerusalem and be quiet. They scattered and they were preaching.

Do you ever gain any strength from watching those who are standing up for the truth of the gospel? I hope you do. In the Scriptures, we see people do that and I hope there have been those times when you say, "Man, that makes me want to be stronger about my resolve, my pressure that I receive to be quiet, to back down, to sit down, to shut up. I'm going to push back against the push back." You see this I trust when you read certain stories of the Bible like Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. You know them as Shadrack, Meshach, Abednego in the Old Testament. And as they stand there with the threat of a fiery furnace, you remember what happened, they were told by those saying bow down to the idol here of Nebuchadnezzar, and they refused and they were dragged in before the king himself and as they lit that furnace hotter than it had ever been, here they said, "Listen, our God is able to deliver us from your



hand. But be it known to you that even if he doesn't, we're not going to bow down to your idol."

I know that's often taught in Sunday school for our teenagers, because these were young teenagers who were exiled from Israel to Babylon, that, you know what, don't conform to the culture and that conform to the culture means you're not going to cuss, you're not going to shoplift, you're not going to smoke weed. I mean, all that, you know, that's really not the temptations I'm assuming you have. You have the temptation of not speaking up, of not representing Christ accurately in this world, of bowing down usually in a way that is passive, not active, which is not, "Here, take this, drink this, do this, smoke this." But it's "Hey, stop talking like you do about this narrow-minded, heavy-handed kind of Bible thumping Christianity. And I'm just telling you, the temptations we have to yield are increasing in our culture. And we need to say, wow, what's the impact that unyielding godly people have had on my life and what's the impact that I could have on others?"

I tell the story of just my wife and I being in, before we were married, in a college class, in a public speaking class. And we were the first people to finally speak up in the class because our professor was so hostile toward Christianity, he couldn't stop just unleashing on it. And so I finally speak up. Well, I'm confident I'm the only person in the class that is offended by all this. And of course, when we start speaking up all the people at the breaks during the college class, they all go, "I'm totally with you, totally with you." And then it starts, a little trickle and a little bit more pushback. I can't say it ended well. As a matter of fact, I paid for it in part because I didn't get a good grade and it was a public speaking class. So I would think... I don't know, I was hoping to get a decent grade in the class. All of that, we saw a movement within this class. As a matter of fact, one of the gals in the class became a Christian before the semester was over because people started then saying, "Hey, we're going to stand up against this." It has this effect, this fortifying effect. We need to see that. The scattered Church, they take the gospel, no matter what the pressure is.

Let me turn you to a passage in Philippians Chapter 1 to remind you of how even if you lose your position, even if you lose your influence, even if you lose your friends, you lose your reputation, if you continue to see that your job is to accurately and consistently stand up for the Christ of the Bible, you are going to be successful. Which the early Church was being, even though it didn't mean they were going to be delivered out of every trial, because certainly Steven can testify to the fact that he died standing up for Christ. But he was going to fortify a lot of people in the process.

Philippians Chapter 1, Paul goes to prison, it's called a prison epistle, he's writing from prison and he says this in verse 12, "I want you to know, brothers," this is Philippians 1:12, "that what has happened to me..." What's that? Prison. "Has really served to," here's the theme of our series here, "advance the gospel." That's what it's done. "Now, my freedom was limited, but I did not stop speaking about the gospel. It is continuing to advance the gospel." How? In two ways. "So that it's become known throughout the whole imperial guard." The Praetorian Imperial Roman Guard was now hearing it because they got a prisoner who won't shut up about what he's in prison for. He keeps talking about Christ. Just like Steven testifies to Christ



and the people that are physically there listening, including Saul of Tarsus, they hear and Christ now is known.

It haunted him by the way. It haunted Paul that he watched Steven die. He refers to it when he's talking to Agrippa when he's in prison later and defending himself before the authorities. And then he writes about it even to Timothy, his protege pastor in Ephesus, and he's talking about how he was a blasphemer and imprisoning people. I mean, he was working against Christ. And one of those vivid memories was him standing there holding the cloaks while they were throwing rocks at Steven until he died. The gospel and Christ was preached. The message was advancing because Stephen died. It was advancing even when Paul was in prison. It was known not only to the Imperial Guard, but "all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ," all the other prisoners.

Verse 14, here's a second way it happens, just like it did when they moved into Judea and Samaria. "And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear." Wow, that's weird, right? The effect of that. They're like now more aggressively going after it. Again, it's like watching a surfing video with people dying. I'm going to go aggressively surf now. That doesn't make any sense. But it makes sense for Christianity because this is a war and we're going to say, "Hey, we're going to keep moving. You may silence Stephen. You're not going to silence us. This movement will not be stopped. We're going to continue to speak up for the truth of the gospel."

Look at the impact of unyielding people. Matter of fact, he... Drop down in this passage. He's hoping to get out, it says they're in the middle of verse 18, "Yes, I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that it will not all be ashamed, but that," having full courage it says, "with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death," which is exactly Stephen's perspective. And you should say, I want Christ to be honored in my job, even if I have it or I lose it, in my relationship, whether it stays civil or whether it turns hostile, whether I live in freedom or get in prison or whether I live on the planet or get killed, I'm going to seek to glorify Christ, which is not to shut up about Christianity, it's to continue to speak up about Christianity. And that is what was taking place. You see this constantly. Why? Because God "is working everything out for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose." His plan to go into Judea and Samaria was being accomplished because you had the Sanhedrin killing Steven.

When John Bunyan wouldn't stop preaching and the authorities threw him in prison, he got thrown into prison and he wrote a book called Pilgrim's Progress. You've heard of it. It became the number three bestselling book in colonial America, and most people, they had three books on the shelf, they had a Bible, they had the Foxe's Book of Martyrs and they had Pilgrim's Progress. That book did more to impact and shape people in their sanctification and fortify their faith than almost any other book besides the Bible and the Foxe's Book of Martyrs. And I want you to think about that. How did that come to be? He could have been out preaching. Instead, he was incarcerated and writing. God knew what he was doing and God



knows what he's doing with you. If you lose your freedoms, if you lose your relationships, if you lose your clients, or if you lose your job.

Stephen wasn't trying to be necessarily argumentative or necessarily pejorative. He wasn't trying to be pejorative or argumentative at all in terms of his relationship with those guys. He wanted them to be saved. That's how he ended his life, praying for their salvation. But it was going to cause that and he wasn't afraid to endure that because he had a sense that that was more important than the peace in his life and all of that was served to advance the gospel. Paul says that and it's a great line, the theme of our next eight weeks, "I want you to know brothers what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel," Philippians 1:12.

Well, if you're going to look back and derive any fortification of your faith or any strengthening of your resolve or any boldness in your words about the martyrs, well then you need to keep them in mind. Go back to our passage in Acts Chapter 8 verse 2, they had a funeral for Steven. I guess they could have put him on a camel and, you know, wrapped up his body, put him on the back of a donkey or a cart and rode him into Samaria somewhere and had a quick, you know, interstate side rest stop funeral. But they didn't. They had a funeral there, it was a big deal. They were devout. It was serious. It was a good kind of funeral in the sense that they mourned his loss. That's what funerals are for. They're not celebrations of life. They're times to mourn and to grieve the loss of this relationship. They're also a time to remember who they were.

And they, I mean, Steven was remembered, remembered not only in the book of Acts, which, by the way, I might argue that Luke spent more time recording the first martyr's speech than he did the first sermon by the pastor, Peter the apostle, in Acts Chapter 2. Think about how much space. They're remembering the words of those who did not yield. He wanted to add more of that speech in the book of Acts, Luke did as he wrote this. That's a big deal. And the early Church, they kept talking about the importance of guys like Stephen who were willing to give their lives for this. It was a high honor to suffer for Christ and to see even our own lives being threatened for the cause of Christianity.

Well, they remembered, Stephen, and number two, you need to remember Christians who suffer. I mean, that's something you must do. Number two, "Remember Christians Who Suffer for Christ." And I mean that specifically and I mean that very directly. You need to remember people right now, contemporaneously to your life, remember those around the world who are suffering because of their Christianity. You need to remember those who have suffered throughout Church history and throughout biblical history.

A couple of passages. Let me start with this one. Hebrews Chapter 12. You are commanded to remember those who suffer for Christ. Let me show you. Go to Hebrews Chapter 12, verse 1. It doesn't make any sense, though it's not a direct imperative for you to remember those. It doesn't make any sense if we don't remember them. And I'll make this all make sense. Look at verse 1 of Hebrews Chapter 12. It starts with a word that I know is going to take us back into Chapter 11 and we will in a second, but look at the first word there. "Therefore..."



Whatever he's talked about in Chapter 11, if you know your Bible, you know what Chapter 11 is all about. Hebrews 11, all these people who trusted God at great personal cost to themselves. "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..." What's the Greek word for witness? We've talked about that, right? Witnesses. Right? There's the idea. It doesn't mean that they had to die, but that word *martus* is the word that they are testifying to the truth of who they are trusting and believing in.

"Let us also lay aside every weight," well, they did, apparently, "and every sin which clings so closely," which for a lot of us is timidity and fear and anxiety and what-ifs about if I really get counted with Christ in this situation, "and let us run with endurance, the race that is set before us." And those people that the writer of Hebrews is writing to, they're being pressured to go back to the old temple ceremonies and the sacrifices and why don't you respect the Levitical priests anymore? They're having pressure and he told us we got a race to run and we got to run it. Look at the people who have run the race and testified, they've been witnesses about the truth, you got to run that race that set before you.

So who are these witnesses? Well, we could spend all morning in Hebrews 11, but let's at least get the last paragraph here or two. Look at verse 32, Hebrews 11:32. I mean he's reaching this fever pitch of just listing all these people, but he says, "What more shall I say?" Hebrews 11:32. "For time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah and David and Samuel and the prophets." Are they perfect people? They're not perfect people. You know, their stories, perhaps you know their stories. "But through faith," and they did a lot for the kingdom of God, "they conquered kingdoms, they enforced justice, they obtained promises, they stopped the mouths of lions." Think of Daniel. "They quenched the power of fire." Think of Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. "They escape the edge of the sword. They were made strong out of weakness. They became mighty in war. They put foreign armies to flight. Women even receive back," in rare occasion in the Old Testament, "their dead by resurrection." Man, that's great. Win, win, win. I like it. I like it. I like it. Get out of trouble. Well, all those things are really hard and it is a lot of trouble.

But look, some did not win in this life. Middle of verse 35, "Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life." They resigned themselves to death, torture and death. "Others suffered mocking," verse 36, "and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death. They were sawn in two." You're not living through that. "They were killed with the sword." Some not quite that bad, but still pretty bad. "They went about in skins of sheep and goats." Why weren't they dressing in nice linen, turbans and cloaks? Why? Well, because they lost their job. "They were destitute," because of their fidelity to God, they were "afflicted," they were "mistreated." And then the little commentary here, which is why the Church should honor their martyrs, "of whom the world was not worthy."

What were they doing? Well, they lost their homes, they were "wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and in caves of the earth. Now all of these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised." All the Old Testament, as Stephen said, was moving up to the ultimate prophet who would come, like Moses, would come as this



intermediary. And Christ was coming. He would pay for our sins. He would represent us before God. And you know what? That was something they were dying for, they didn't even have the full picture of God's provision and God's provision was in Christ. "Since God," verse 40, "had provided something better for us." We don't look forward to it with our imagination, with a blurry fog, we can look back on it with the precision of historical writings and say, Christ came. He was the "lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." "Apart from us," by the way, "they shouldn't be made perfect." They don't even have their sins forgiven without the coming of Christ. Right?

And that was an argument from lesser to greater. Look at how we ought to be ready to be sawn in two, to be tortured and killed, to be flogged and mocked. "Therefore, since we're surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses," martyrs, if you will, "let us lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking," by the way, you want a good example of a martyr, "to Jesus, the founder and protector of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him," which was the ultimate accomplishment of his mission on earth, "he endured the cross." So he had this terrible, awful thing happening here called a Roman execution. And he "despised," he looked down upon "the shame" like not a big deal. I'd rather please God. I'm willing to think less of the shame and the pain. And of course, God exalted him now "seated at the right hand of the throne of God." None of that makes sense if you don't remember those who have suffered for Christ and even Christ himself who suffered and we're told to remember these people, think of them. Remember them.

First Peter Chapter 5 in thinking about how the adversary in verse 8 is "prowling around, seeking to devour us," we're told, to "resist him and stand firm in your faith." Satan would love to take you down. He's at work in the sons of disobedience. The non-Christian culture is working against your allegiance and commitment and resolve to follow Christ. They'd love for you to yield. Satan wants to make you yield. Somehow bend the truth to fit what they want you to say. And it says in this passage, "as we stand firm," it says this: "we need to know," remember, to be mindful that the, "same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood around the world.

There are two passages, First Peter Chapter 5, Hebrews Chapters 12 and then 11, for us to know that we have a biblical imperative for us to remember those who have suffered and are suffering. I rarely try to exercise pastoral authority in such a specific way, but I'm asking you, I do it every week, I try to give you some books to look at on our digital worksheet or if you got one when you came in, at the bottom I always give books, I don't know 13, 14, 15 of them. This week they're all basically the same. Same theme, maybe different subjects, but all in the same concept, which is here are people who have suffered for their faith. Here are people who are suffering for their faith. And I want you to find one of those this week and I want you to start reading it. If you're well versed in this then find one that you haven't read on the list, I bet I got one on there you haven't read.

And I just want you to get it, either digitally on your phone or your iPad, whatever, and I want you to start reading it, even if it's just two or three pages a day. If you order when it comes in



the mail this week and you put it by your bedside, I want you to at least pick that up just a couple of pages before you go to sleep and to think about the people who have laid down their lives and the people who have been in prison, the people who have been tortured for their faith, and then just say, OK, tomorrow morning when I get up and go to work, I got a little pressure, when I'm in that moms group and they're kind of getting on me about these issues of cultural this or cultural that. And they know that Christianity is in conflict with that and in opposition to that, I'm not going to be afraid. At least I'm going to work through my sweaty palms and weak knees and I'm going to say, you know, I stand with Christ on this. We need to remember Christians who suffer for Christ. You can't do this without getting your mind back on those. So there are a bunch of books, find one of them and just start reading about what's going on in the world and has gone on in the world for those who have been unyielding about their faith. They remembered Stephen and we should remember those who have died for their faith.

Verse three. It was an interesting description of the way Saul of Tarsus is now ravaging the Church. Let's read that verse again. Verse 3 Acts Chapter 8, "But Saul was ravaging..." Can't read a commentary without them pointing out that this Greek word is used to describe outside of the Bible, the killing of animals by other animals, predator animals. So like an animal that gets blood all over its face and fangs or dripping blood after he tears a gazelle apart or whatever, that picture is the picture of Saul just kind of just ranting and raving and going and just wanting desperately to destroy the Church. He's messing it up. It's chaotic. It's inducing fear, surely at some level in the hearts of Christians.

And then look at this. This is a proactive kind of persecution. "Entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison." I want you to think about that. It's not like, "You guys cannot gather anymore on the Temple Mount. You cannot be there. We're going to have temple guards there. We're going to arrest you and you are going to be in trouble if you come to church this week." That's one kind of persecution. You start preaching, James Coates, you know, the pastor up in Edmonton, got arrested and you can blame that all on COVID restrictions or whatever. But I mean, the idea is him saying, "I'm going to preach, I'm going to preach in a situation," a lot like other situations and I won't get into all that debate. But a lot of things Edmonton's allowing people to do. Not going to allow you to have church. He does church. He gets thrown in prison. It's one thing for you to be thrown in prison for standing on a stage and doing what they told you not to do.

And when I hear him and his story, at least in the news, who graduated from a local seminary here preaching the word at Grace Life Church in Edmonton, I also get to hear his wife take the circuit and go to the Christian newspapers and some of the talk shows and a couple of TV stations. And Erin Coates talks about, you know, "my husband's in prison, my husband's in prison." That's one thing. Your husband put himself out there. But think about if they said, "Oh, do you agree with your husband or not agree with your husband? Because we're coming to your house, we're going to take you. You might as well get your kids situated with the non-Christian aunt or something, because we're taking you to prison, too." That's a different kind of persecution, right? That's trying to smoke you out and rat and root you out from your little clefts of your rock and, you know, hiding in the corners.



And all I'm telling you is that there is an increasing move in our culture to not just say, "Hey, you start bringing your religion out of the pew and into the marketplace, then we're going to narc you. You start trying to take your ethics from the Bible and live it out there, that's a big deal." But we're getting to the place now where there's a demand for you as they find you in your home or in your business or in your neighborhood or in your industry saying now, "You've got to parrot what we say." You got to parrot what we say. They're going after us. There is that sense in which they're saying, "We're not going to let you hide anymore. We don't even like that you're in our culture anymore." There's an increasing pressure upon us in that regard.

And you may say, "Ah, you know, you're just sounding the alarm and it's doom and gloom." Well, OK, even if you think we're a long way from that in our culture, you know that's happening all over the world. You do know that? Read some of the books, go to some website, go to the Voice of the Martyrs website, "persecution.com," and just read about what's going on around the world right now of people seeking, actively seeking to find Christians and having them either imprisoned, punishing them with fines, the blasphemy laws that are ramping up all over the world. I've just skimmed some of those reports, lengthy reports of nations that have blasphemy laws, which mean, of course, that you can't blaspheme the going cultural-religious tide. And if you're a Christian, of course, you're going against that. So we're not going to dig that. We're against that.

Number three. It's like Saul doing all of that and not just the men who are up there speaking. Even a wife like Erin. Even the men and women all taken off to prison. You need to, number three on the outline, you need to "Give Up on Hiding Your Christianity." Because you can hide your Christianity and think, "Well, I'm never going to have to be stuck with the decision between confessing or renouncing Christ." You're right, when the temperature is not up, you can come to church, you can sing the songs, you can say amen at the end of a sermon, you can even clap when it's over. "Yeah, I dig that, I'm all for that." And go to your work, shut your mouth all week long in your neighborhood, in your relationship with the world. Don't even, just don't talk about it and you'll be fine. I doubt you'll be called on the carpet as to what you believe and you're not going to be in trouble.

You can be quiet, but when the heat ramps up, you don't have that luxury. Then they start asking you, they start saying, "You need to do this." I mean, even the Nini's Cafe story in the west side of Chicago, I mean there's a good example. They say, "You've got to parrot what we say. And if you don't, we're going to shut your business down. We're going to burn it," which is what happened in that case. I want you to just think about the ways in which that takes place.

For instance, they're going to call us the worst dregs of society if we don't parrot what they say and if we can't say it because we are faithful to Christ and we are trying to love the world by saying Christ loved you, here's the answer to your sin and Christ died for your sin. But sin is, I don't know, highlighting distinctions between ethnicities, well we can't do that. And, you know, foregoing all the sexual rules of what God said is allowable and what is not. We can't



forego that. We have to affirm that. And rebelling against the natural order of things like gender. Well we can't do that because God was clear on that. Matthew 19, Genesis 1, we can't do that. And they're going to go, well, you can sit and say those things in your pew. Now we're saying if you don't say those out loud and you're a Christian business owner, you're a Christian salesman, you're a Christian accountant, whatever, "Listen, you're going to have to parrot our lines. You're going to have to approve sin. And if you're not saying that, then you're in big trouble. There's a price to pay."

You just need to see the move. I know that you think cancel culture, as you listen to your talk radio, it's all about political views. Well, you understand this is not about my concern about politics. This is about my concern about what the Bible says and what Christ says and so we cannot back down. And I'm saying you might as well now just start living your life more openly about your Christianity, because there is going to come a time when you can't anyway. So just open it up.

Speaking of, as it says in Hebrews 11, the Lion's Den, you know it was Daniel who got thrown in the lion's den. And again, it's another one of those fiery furnace things saying, "Yay, God, got him out of trouble." But you do remember how he got in that trouble? "Well, yeah, it was the jealousy of the other leaders there in the Medo-Persian kingdom and they wanted to go after Daniel." I get all that. I get it. But when Daniel heard that you could not pray to any other God besides the Medo-Persians and what they had decided, well, he went to do what he normally did. And you remember that one little fact in the way that he describes what he does in Daniel 6, it says, "he opened his windows and prayed, prayed toward Jerusalem." He was in exile in Babylon and he opened the window. And I'm thinking just all he had to do was (whispering) close the windows, closed the windows. I mean, that will at least buy you some time. Now, I know you got jealous but close the windows, right? If you're Daniel's wife, I'm thinking you're probably going to suggest that. It wasn't like he marched into Darius' palace and said, "Hey, everybody, I want you to watch me pray right now. I'm going to pray to Yahweh. I'm going to pray to the God of the Old Testament."

No, he wasn't trying to be a jerk. He's trying to what he always does. And he's not going to hide his Christianity in that case, right? An anachronistic term, but he's not going to hide his devotion to the God of Israel. And I'm saying you can't hide your Christianity. I don't want you to hide... I don't want you to try to hide your Christianity because they're coming to find out what you believe. I mean, they are, one way or another. You might as well go on the record now. And I think you need to stop being or trying to be an undercover Christian. Give up on hiding your Christianity. We really can't hide. We're going to be outed at some point. Might as well say, "OK, scary. But we're not going to be undercover Christians."

What were they doing? Verse 4. Acts Chapter 8 verse 4. "Now those who were scattered went about," look at this word, "preaching the word." Now, who were these people? Back up to verse 1. "Saul approved of his execution," that's Steven who died. "And there arose a great persecution," it says, "against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the," preachers, well, the "apostles" were the preachers. You're going to get a big crowd of thousands of people out there all following



Christ. Who's going to teach them about how Christ fulfilled the messianic promises and prophecies of the Old Testament? Well, we're going to have Peter or James or John do that. No, you're right, those were the "preacher" preachers. We're not talking about that kind of preaching.

These guys were the ones scattered even while their preachers stayed in place, although there were some people who could probably teach some line upon line in the Old Testament. But these people were all now commissioned and deputized to preach. I doubt that that's a word that you use, right? If someone asks you on the golf course this week, "Hey, are you a preacher?" You'd probably say, "No, man. I'm not a preacher." But if they insist too much about, I don't know, whatever what to have, "I'm not saying it to disparage you but is that what you do in life?" "No, that's not what I do. No, that's Mike Fabarez you want to get, right? It's not me. He's the preacher."

You realize that this passage is defining preaching as something the scattered people of God who sat there listening to preaching did. They're preaching, preaching the word, which is a loaded term as well. The "word." That the "word" is a description of God revealing the truth. And sometimes even those words even overlap between the revealed truth and the one the revealed truth is all about. Christ himself is called "the word" in John's gospel. "He's the word and the word became flesh and dwelt among us." But the idea is what God revealed about Christ, that's the "word." That's the truth. What's the word on the matter? This is the word on the matter. This is the truth on the matter. God has revealed himself. And they went out preaching the "word." And that's your task and my task this week, next week, next month, until you die, to preach the word. So when someone asks, are you the preacher, your answer is "Yeah. I am, that's my job." Why? "Because the institution I'm a part of is to advance a message, so I'm going to preach the message." Now, it's usually done in dialog and discussion, but that's your job.

Let me put it this way, number four, your job is to "Keep Telling the Truth about Christ." Keep telling the truth about Christ, and I want to say it that way, because if you just say to people at work, "Yeah, I'm a Christian." They'll respond, "Oh, cool. Cool. Well, I'm not. I'm a Buddhist. I'm a Muslim. I'm a Hindu." And you respond, "OK, cool. High-5s." I mean, that's not what you're asked to do. Because I hope you know the theology of any other religion is going to have an opinion about Christ that are not the facts about Christ presented in the Bible. Right? Islam says that Jesus is a prophet. Right? The Eastern religions talk about him maybe as being an enlightened guru. OK. I mean, some groups see him as a distillation of ancient wisdom, right? This is like Confucian wisdom coming to bear in the light of Christ. OK.

But that ain't what God said about him, and we've been studying that every time we go to church about Christ being the one who is, as we read recently from Colossians Chapter 1, he is the first in front of all things, the inheritor of all things. Matter of fact, "He's the creator of all things, things visible or invisible, thrones, dominion," power. He created them all. "All things are created by him and for him, he has preeminence in everything." And all of that should be clear. Matter of fact, true or false? Christ is a unique and supreme person. He's the most unique and supreme person of all persons. He is the God-man. "In him dwells," to quote



Colossians, "in him the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form." So Christ is unique and supreme, right? Is Christ greater than Muhammad? Is Christ greater than Confucius? Is Christ greater than Devadas? Is Christ greater than any philosopher? You would say, "Yes." I would hope you'd say yes. OK.

If you're called to take the message of the supremacy of Christ to the world while all the other religions and philosophies are telling a different story about Christ making him lesser than he is, then I take the truth about the supremacy of Christ to my friends at work, in my neighborhood, to the other moms at the mom gathering at the soccer field or whatever, and you say, well, Christ is supreme and therefore I'm going to tell you the truth about the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ. If I'm saying that as a part of the Christian faith, then I'm asking the question: is my Christian faith and is my religion, is it unique and supreme over all other religions? And that's where you're going to go, "Well, I'm not saying that. I don't want to say that we're supreme and I don't know if Christ is supreme. I mean, we're not supreme. We're just one beggar trying to tell another beggar where to find bread. I mean, you know, what do we know?"

Well, wait a minute. Christ is unique and supreme over all people. Matter of fact, he said he's "the way, the truth, the life. No one comes to the Father except through him." That's not what all the other religions say. That's not what the average secular says. That's not what people are saying. We're saying "there's no other name under heaven given among men by which you must be saved," must be saved, must be saved, no other name. There's no other person. This is the only way. You might ask, "Now, is Christianity saying that?" Well, if it's faithful Christianity, it's going to say that. And if that's saying what God says is that corpus of teaching, is that evangelistic message, is that truth that's being proclaimed, is that then superior to all these other people saying different things and contrary things about Christ? Absolutely it is.

Do you want to have trouble? Go to work and tell your friends that. Go say Christianity is superior to all other religions. You groan, "I don't want to say that." Why? Because you know what you're going to get. You're going to get pushback. You're going to get hostility. If you want to see people who say they're against hate get filled with hate, all you got to do is talk about the truth of who Christ is. That Christ loves us enough to die for our sins and here are just some of the sins that the Bible says are sins.

I can't even say certain sins in our culture are sin without having people flip me off and call me a homophobe or a racist. Think about that. Yeah, distinguishing ethnicities and aspects of ethnicities, that's wrong. The Bible says just the opposite of that. I'm not concerned about dividing us by ethnicity, I'm about uniting us under Christ. Those things don't matter. No barbarians, Scythian, slave or free. We're all together in Christ. I can't say that, not in the secular company of those who don't buy that because they're going to attack me. I can't talk about sexual ethics from Christ's perspective. I can't talk about gender issues from the order of creation. I can't talk about that without inviting the hostility of my culture. So I guess I'll shut up about it. Were they refugees trying to avoid trouble? If they were, they wouldn't be



preaching the word. But they were preaching the word because that wasn't the point, trying to avoid the problems. It was about them being faithful representatives of advancing the gospel.

Turning to one last passage. Hebrews. Hebrews Chapter 10. I don't know how long you've been a Christian, but I fear that maybe if most of the debates that you're involved in have to do with sharpening your theology in the debates in your mind and they are books that you're debating, one book against the other. It's probably a little different than when you first became a Christian. And you took the word of God at face value, you felt the urgency of the salvation of your friends and your neighbors and your coworkers and you started talking to them about them needing to do what you just did, to confess your sins before God, repent of them and trust Christ to have your sins forgiven. That probably caused more problems than when you settled into your comfortable Christian life.

Hebrews Chapter 10, drop all the way down to verse 32. The writer of Hebrews says I want you to think back to those early days. "Recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings." I bet you lost some relationships back then. "Sometimes you are publicly exposed to reproach." Now, that was serious back then, of course, perhaps you haven't been publicly, verbally flogged. "And affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated." Maybe there was a time in your Christian life when you were more attracted to reading about the persecuted Church around the world, and maybe there was some interest in the martyrs of Church history because all of this was really fresh and happening in your relationships. "You had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew," you knew and it was palpable and real to you, "that you yourself had a better possession and an abiding one." You took those terms in Scripture about a place where your "treasure cannot rust and it can't be stolen and it's not going to be eaten by moths." You took that seriously.

Well, "Therefore," verse 35, "don't throw away your confidence." That's exactly where you need to live. You need to be right there. It's got a great reward. "You have need of endurance." You need that kind of thing that started you in the Christian life. It needs to keep on-going. You need to be fueled by that continually, "so that when you've done the will of God, you may receive what is promised." Now, a conflation of a bunch of biblical concepts in the Old Testament says, "For, yet in a little while, the coming one will come and will not delay." Certainly referring to the fact that Christ is returning, he's going to return. "But my righteous one can live by faith," which he is going to unload on what that looks like in Chapter 11.

"Live by faith," which is going to end with people being sawn in two. At the end of Chapter 11, he's going to say, "Hey, you run whatever race is in front of you." Look at this, "And if he shrinks back," as opposed to being these kinds of people in Chapter 11, as imperfect as they might have been in various aspects of their lives, they trusted God. And they weren't afraid to say it. "If you shrink back, my soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but those who have faith and preserve their souls."



I want you to be bold. I want you to not back down, I want you to open the windows. You don't have to go in with a milk crate and a bullhorn and preach in the parking lot of your office. But how about you just saying to your coworker, "Hey, I'm a Christian, I don't know if I've ever been really clear about that with you, but I'm a Christian. I believe God has revealed himself and he's done it in this book called the Bible. If you ever want to talk about that, I'd be happy to talk about it." I mean, does that sound genteel and kind? I mean, just say that to six people this week. "Hey, I'm a Christian, I don't know if you know I'm a Christian, I'm a Christian, and I believe that God has revealed himself clearly in the Bible. If you ever want to talk about that, I'd love to talk to you about that."

I'll bet you're going to have a couple of takers, and in those conversations, I bet you're going to have a little bit of difficulty with the conditioning of the culture that has infected the minds of those you talk with, with the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience filtering through and maybe even becoming a hostile conversation. You keep your cool, you be kind, you hold out the words of life. But be unyielding about your commitment and resolve to follow Christ.

Follow him not only in your behaviors, follow him by the words that you say as you represent him in this world. There's a great reward for all of this. I think we're rewarded in many ways. I think we'd have a better church if all of us were willing to and engaged in a kind of representation of Christ that really did start to cost us from week to week. I think we'd argue about less things. I think we'd be less willing to divide over dumb things. I don't think the Church in parts of the world where people are being dragged off to prison are really complaining about, I don't know, how cold the temperature was in the auditorium. I don't think that was probably the emails most of those pastors get in the persecuted church. Or, you know, can't we have gluten-free donuts on the...? I mean, I just don't think that's probably what's going on when people are being dragged off to prison and your relatives are losing their jobs and their freedoms over their Christianity. I'm not saying it would be nice to have the kind of food you want on the table and it would be nice for you to set the temperature and let everybody else tough it out. I'm just telling you, I think a church that's willing to live on the edge of advancing the gospel is probably the kind of church you'd like to go to. I know it's the kind that God takes pleasure in. Let's advance the gospel this week.

Pray with me. God, I'd like us not to worry, be anxious, fearful. I know that's hard, it's a temptation, the timidity of even Timothy, a well-trained disciple of the apostle Paul was still reluctant to bring up Paul in prison. That sometimes we need to identify more with that compassion of those who have suffered and are suffering. So I do pray, God, that this church would be responsive to my call to at least do some reading this week on the persecuted Church, on the martyrs of history. We might be inspired to be emboldened, fortified in our resolve to stand up for Christ. I'm thankful that we get together again week after week, at least for now, without people taking down our license plate numbers and getting us fired at work because we're here. We get to encourage each other and strengthen each other and help each other stay in the fight. The kind of fight that doesn't have weapons that are of the world, but there are still weapons that tear down every argument, every lofty thought, that raises itself up against the knowledge of God. Even that statement, God reminds us of the



superiority of speaking the truth about the superior person that we follow, the one who redeemed us. So encourage us this week, please. We seek to advance the gospel.

In Jesus name. Amen.