

“Would I deny Jesus?”
Revelation 2:8-11
September 28, 1997
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It was a time when Christians were known as “atheists” - not because they didn't believe in God but because they refused to worship the Emperor - who had proclaimed himself to be god.

And because of their refusal to worship the Emperor the crowds asked to do away with the Christians.

"Under (the Emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96) emperor worship was made compulsory for every Roman citizen. Failure to comply meant death.

Each year every citizen had to burn incense on Caesar's altar, after which he was issued a certificate. To be without a certificate, as must have been the case for Christians obedient to Christ, was to risk discovery and the death penalty." (Robert Thomas An Exegetical Commentary p160)

When a man named Polycarp was brought before the officials he was given a choice either sacrifice to Caesar, denying Christ or be put to death.

His response was "Eighty and six years I have served Christ and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?"

Again he was threatened but again he replied:

"You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire that awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come do what you will."

So angry were the people that even though it was the Sabbath, the Jews joined the crowds in carrying wood (contrary to their laws) to fuel the fire to burn Polycarp.

As the fire was started Polycarp prayed:

"O Lord God almighty... I bless you that you have granted unto me this day and hour that I may share among the number of the martyrs..."

Have you ever wondered what you would do if you were faced with such a situation - a situation wherein you were forced to choose between death or renouncing your faith in Jesus?

Polycarp, the man whose death I just described, was the Bishop of the churches of Smyrna.

Smyrna, you will recognize, is one of the seven churches to whom the Apostle John wrote in the 2nd and 3rd chapters of Revelation.

Smyrna was in what we, today, call the country of Turkey.

It was on the site of what is now the modern city of Izmar about 35 miles north of the city of Ephesus which we discussed last week.

It was then a city of about 200,000 with a flourishing trade business because of its harbor on the Mediterranean.

Because, years earlier, it had sided with Rome against other armies, Rome gave permission for a special temple to be built in Smyrna - a temple to the Emperor. Emperor worship was strong.

Not only were the Christians subject to discrimination and persecution from the Romans in the city but also from the Jews.

There was, apparently, a sizable Jewish population in the city that equally hated the Christians.

Christians were losing their jobs, their homes, and their lives - all because they had committed their lives to Jesus Christ.

What would you say if you were writing to them to encourage them?

There is a friend of mine who is very near death.

I have been meeting with him and talking about how he deals with the pain, the doubts and sometimes even the fear of death that grips him.

Put yourself in his place - what would help? What would you need to hear?

French novelist, Albert Camu (Camus) wrote that death is philosophy's only problem.

I'm guessing that many of you watched the marvelous film "Shadowlands" with Anthony Hopkins as C.S. Lewis.

That movie explored the depths of the problem of death.

What do you say at a time like that? What can make any difference?

What would Jesus say to C.S. Lewis, to my friend, to the believers in Smyrna?

READ Revelation 2:8-11

"To the angel of the church of Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty - yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are

not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death."

As I pondered this text for today's sermon it occurred to me that I could have a problem with application - the "so what" of a sermon.

Only some here are acquainted with real grief - the former or anticipated death of a loved one.

Only few, if any, here are acquainted with persecution - discrimination maybe for some but persecution not likely.

When we think of persecution we think of the Coliseum in Rome and the Christians being fed to the lions - and a long time ago.

What if you knew that in 1996 over 156,000 Christians were killed for their belief in Jesus? (Regent University study)

Last September the US Congress passed a concurrent resolution that began: "Whereas oppression and persecution of religious minorities around the world has emerged as one of the most compelling human rights issues of the day. In particular, the worldwide persecution and martyrdom of Christians persists at alarming levels. This is an affront to the international moral community and to all people of conscience." (ITLD p111)

Our own State Department released an unprecedented 83-page report on July 22 outlining the religious persecution occurring around the world in at least 78 countries (C.T Sept 1, 1997)

In southern Sudan in the colorful marketplace of Manyiel local African Dinka people gathered around the Arab stalls bargaining for clothes and other items.

In this town 19 year old Neema tells her story.

"She was almost 11 when Moslem invaders from the north swept into her Christian village and carried her off into slavery."

She told of the day when the Arab militia came kidnapping children and killing almost everyone else.

Neema was literally thrown across the back of a horse (like in some old movie you might have seen) and carried away.

She spoke softly of what happened that day.

Neema was taken north and sold to a man to be used as a servant.

They gave her a Moslem name and forced her to participate in Moslem rituals. When the man's wife was gone, Neema would be used for other purposes and when the wife discovered Neema was pregnant she chased her out of the house and she escaped.

Someone asked how she got back to her home and Neema said that slave traders brought her back and sold her to her family.

“But now I cannot marry. I have been with a man, and I have a child. I am no longer free to marry a husband.” (TBCO p18)

This is not an isolated incident.

The Baltimore Sun last year ran a series of stories on the Christians being sold into slavery.

Two reporters went to Sudan and captured on film their purchase of two slaves for \$500 each.

Christian agencies are now involved in attempting to purchase as many of the child slaves as they can to return them to their families.

This is not 1797 - it is 1997 - This is happening now.

In Sudan it is a crime, punishable by death, to convert to Christ.

Nina Shea is a Roman Catholic who heads the Puebla Program of the Freedom House Foundation.

Freedom House was established by Eleanor Roosevelt and Wendell Wilkie nearly 50 years ago to be advocates for people around the world who lived in repressive regimes - dictatorships etc.

In the opening of her recent book on the persecution of Christians she writes, "Millions of American Christians pray in their churches each week, oblivious to the fact that Christians in many parts of the world suffer brutal torture, arrest, imprisonment, and even death - their homes and communities laid waste - for no other reason than that they are Christians. The shocking, untold story of our time is that more Christians have died this century simply for being Christians than the first nineteen centuries after the birth of Christ. They have been persecuted and martyred before an unknowing, indifferent world and a largely silent Christian community." p 1 of ITLD

These are our brothers and sisters in the Lord - what are we to say?

On the 16th of April last year at 5:00 in the morning, a large group of authorities came to a church in Cuba where the members had gathered at 4:00 for a prayer meeting. The people were dragged from the building and then the police began destroying the building and the furniture in it. In the name of Fidel Castro's government they carried off anything they thought had value. (Voice of the Martyrs WWW news briefs)

On February 5 in the Punjab province of Pakistan a mob of many thousand invaded a Christian section of a city burning down churches, homes and businesses, schools and clinics - nearly 75% of the Christians were homeless after the fires. (VOM)

In Guerrero, Mexico members of the Protestant church in town have been told to revert to the Catholic church or leave town. Three men have been jailed since May 11 for

“professing the Evangelical Religion and refusing to carry out stewardship duties in the community’s Catholic festival.”

On May 14 of this year in Pedapalli, India the thatched roof church of the Christians was burned by Hindus who were fearful that the entire village would become Christian. About 4 years ago the first family became Christian and since then over 40 families have converted.

In the State Department report I mentioned earlier, China was singled out as the place where the most widespread persecution of Christians is taking place.

I quote from our own government: “Local authorities (in China) used threats, demolition of property, extortion, fines, interrogation, detention, and reform-through-education sentences in carrying out this campaign.”

Last November, two pastors of the Word of Faith church in Uzbekistan were arrested along with 62 members of the church. For 12 days they were incarcerated in a cell not large enough for them to lie down and they were fed only every other day. Their crime is holding worship services.

If you have been watching the papers at all you know of the recent law passed in Russia and signed by Yeltzin within the last two days, hat will have a chilling effect on Christian liberty in that country.

These are real people in real places - Today!
This is not 1st century Smyrna, this is nearly 21st century Mexico, India, Pakistan, Vietnam, Cuba - places that Americans are traveling to every day.

What do we say to these believers who are enduring such atrocities?

There are several organizations in our country and around the world that are attempting to mobilize Christians in free countries to speak out for those who are persecuted.

The desire is to put enough pressure on our governments that they take this persecution into account when they deal with other governments.

The desire is also to call God’s people to prayer on behalf of these who are being terrorized and killed for their faith.

I want to recommend to you two books that will give you a greater awareness of the problem and how you can be involved in prayer and other actions to help confront this very real problem.

In the Lion’s Den by Nina Shea is a good primer.

And Their Blood Cries Out by Paul Marshall is a more comprehensive treatment with the names, addresses, e-mail numbers of several good organizations taking the lead in these matters.

The National Association of Evangelicals in our own country has spoken out forcefully on this matter and copies of a resolution that is making a difference in the halls of congress is available at the information booth in the Welcome Center.

This lengthy excursus on the persecution of Christians in the world today was for the purpose of helping us to realize that Jesus' words to the church in Smyrna are not out of date - but are real in the lives of thousands, even millions today.

And His words apply not only to those who are suffering persecution but are applicable to anyone who realistically faces his or her own mortality.

But I find Jesus' words to these suffering Christians to be very interesting.
Maybe, to these American ears, even puzzling.

I believe there are passages of Scripture that give Christians the right and even the obligation to make every effort to change society, to change the culture, to change laws and even governments when they are corrupt and repressive.

I believe it is right that Christians around the world attempt to pressure governments, beginning with our own, to act on behalf of believers around the world.

I believe it is our obligation to pray asking God to change the circumstances of those who undergoing such inhumanity.

I believe it is right that Christians rise up in "holy horror" at the atrocities being perpetrated on Christians.

But do you, also, notice that these actions are absent in this message from Jesus to the suffering church in Smyrna?

Hear again his words: READ 2:8-11

"To the angel of the church of Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty - yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death."

Do you hear him?

Yes, I know you are suffering and I'm telling you that you will suffer more and some of you will die in the midst of it.

Where is the promise of intervention, of changing the situation, of making the evil go away, of justice prevailing, or of Americans riding in to save the day?

I want a message that says God will intervene and the persecution will stop!
 But reality is that the persecution may not stop.
 Reality is that loved ones still die.
 Reality is that we will die - not necessarily violently but we will die.

What about when circumstances don't change, can't change - what do I hold on to then?

Jesus writes through John to these believers who are in the midst of real persecution - some are losing their very lives and he says:
 I want you to know who I am,
 I want you to know I'm in control
 and I want you to know the ultimate outcome.

Put your faith in anything less than these three truths and you will ultimately despair. Anything less than these truths will fail you when life is hardest.

First, who does he say he is?
 He refers back to chapter one and the vision of Jesus that John sees there.
 But out of that fuller description Jesus selects two things about himself that he wishes them to remember in this life and death time.

He writes, I want you to remember I am "the First and the Last."
 Those words are taken from the book of Isaiah.
 Three times God reminds the people of Israel of who he is:

Israel and Judah were fearful because of the invaders who were destroying their land and carrying their people off into slavery. But God said 44:2ff "This is what the Lord says, He who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you: Do not be afraid, O Jacob, my servant...This is what the Lord says... the Lord Almighty: I am the first and the last; apart from me there is no God."

Isaiah 48:12-14 (Isaiah, using the Lord's words, tells what will happen) "Listen to me, O Jacob, Israel whom I have called" I am he; I am the first and I am the last. My own hand laid the foundations of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens; when I summon them, they all stand up together.

Who was there when the earth was formed?

Who was there in the garden of Eden walking with Adam and Eve?
 Who was there when Noah needing saving from the flood?
 Who was there with Abraham providing for him in a new country?
 Who was there protecting Moses as he fled with 2 1/2 million people from the Pharaohs of Egypt?
 Who was there when, under Joshua, the Israelites conquered a new land?
 etc.
 Who has always been there - providing, caring, correcting and saving His people?

Who has been there from the beginning of your life?

A couple of weeks ago I received from Delores Vincent of our church an audio tape. Driving in my car I listened to it but I was a couple of minutes into the tape before I realized the event recorded.

It was an infant dedication from 18 years ago as I held the Vincent's son in my arms and prayed for him asking God's protection, guidance and saving grace on his life.

At the end of that section of the tape the next thing I heard was the voice of Tim Vincent now 18 years later - August 24 here in this Worship Center- when Tim told of how God had gotten hold of his life.

God was there all the time.

So Jesus says to these Christians in Smyrna - I am the first and the last - I have always been there and you can therefore believe I WILL always be there.

Not only is He the First and the Last but He is the one "who died and came to life again."

Of what are they to be reminded when he says that?

Two things:

One, that this Jesus who is the eternally existent "I AM", who has always been and always will be LOVES THEM SO MUCH HE DIED FOR THEM.

Ravi Zacharias of India wrote recently of a conversation he had with a Belgian interpreter.

As they were driving to the next meeting the man, whose name was Wilfred told him of how severely his relationship to Jesus had been tested.

"The hymns resounded all day on the reality of heaven, and the speakers expounded on it. I was basking in the greatness of this hope and enjoying the promise of such a destiny. Quite unexpectedly, my name was called during the meeting to go immediately to the office as there was an urgent call awaiting me. I did just that and picked up the phone to hear the somber and sobbing voice of my wife, Faith, informing me that our nine-month-old baby had, without warning, died in his crib a short while ago."

He recounted that the news brought him to the lowest point in his life. The devastation defied description. The anguish and anger built up within his heart to volcanic proportions, threatening to spew out his uncontainable grief. A cry within him wanted to sue God for contempt of human life. He packed his bags, bought a train ticket, and sat alone in his seat looking out through the window where nothing seemed to ease the ache.

Across the aisle from him sat a man reading his Bible, opposite whom sat two young people who did not try to hide their disdain toward so-called religious books. Their taunts were finally responded to by the man holding the Bible, and their discussion took on some heavy philosophical jousting. Finally, one of the young men, anger unmasked, leaned over and said to the man, "if your God is as loving and kind as you say He is, tell me why He lets the innocent suffer? Why does he permit so much warfare? Why does He allow little children to die? What kind of love is that?"

The questions, especially the last two, stabbed Wilfred in a way he had never felt before, and he caught himself on the verge of blurting out, "Yes, you religious zealot! Answer them and me, and tell us why He lets children die. What sort of love is that?"

But a strange mental transformation took place in Wilfred's own mind. He awaited the other man's answer, and then he looked at the two young men and found himself saying, "Do you mind if I enter into your conversation? I'll tell you how much God loves you; He gave His only Son to die for you."

The young men abruptly interrupted him and argued that it was easy for Wilfred to make such platonic pronouncements disconnected from the concrete world of death and desolation.

Wilfred waited for the appropriate moment because he needed every ounce of courage and conviction to say it once, but to say it clearly. "No, no, no, my dear friends," he said.

"I am not distanced from the real world of pain and death. In fact, the reason I am on this train is because I am heading home for the funeral of my nine-month-old son. He died just a few hours ago, and it has given the cross a whole new meaning for me. Now I know what kind of a God it is who loves me, a God who willfully gave His Son for me." (Can man Live without God)

Jesus writes to those suffering Christians - that is the kind of God I am - I love you enough to die for you and even when you were sinners.

But also Jesus wants to remind them of another powerful truth:

He is alive.

He was dead but He IS alive - not just metaphorically, not just philosophically, but actually, flesh and blood alive.

What gave those first disciples, Peter, James and John, the courage to face a hostile world?

What made them willing to give their lives for what they were preaching?

They believed it! They had seen him with their own eyes.

In another letter John wrote he said, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched - this we proclaim concerning the Word of Life" Jesus.

Think about it for a minute. Do you believe Jesus is literally alive today?

He who is the first and the last, the one who loved you so much he died for you is actually alive and actively aware and involved in your life today?

When you face persecution or when you face death itself, Jesus says remember who I am.

But Jesus also wants them to know that He is in control.

Several times he writes "I know..."

"I know your affliction and your poverty..."

"I know the slander..." against you

And he tells them what will yet happen:

"Some of you will be put in prison"

"You will suffer persecution for ten days" - that is for a limited amount of time.

Jesus says I know your situation like the back of my own hand.

I know everything about you even before it happens.

I know you personally, I know your limits, I know what I'm doing.

Remember Jesus words in Matthew 10:29,30 "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

Donald Barnhouse wrote: "What though we be unknown to the world? We are known to God!" And He is in control.

But lastly he says I want you to know the ultimate outcome:

"He who has an ear to hear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death."

Except for those who are still alive on this earth when Jesus comes again, we will all die.

We may die comfortably in our sleep in our own bed or we may die violently at the hands of persecutors, or a thousand ways in between those two ways, but we will all die.

The Bible teaches that this is the “first” death - the one we experience here on earth.

And though the bodies are buried, the spirits of those who are trusting in Jesus go directly into the presence of the Lord awaiting the day when our bodies are resurrected.

Those spirits of those who are not trusting in Jesus do not go to be with Christ but await the resurrection of their bodies when they will experience the second death.

Here is what the Bible says later in this book:

20:6 "The second death has no power over" them (those who belong to Jesus).

20:14 "The lake of fire is the second death".

21:8 "But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars - their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."

Jesus' words to these suffering Christians is that they can absolutely count on something:

They will not, definitely not (Jesus uses a double negative here for emphasis) be hurt at all by the second death.

Instead as he tells them in V10 "I will give you the crown of life."

Nothing less than those three truths could bring real comfort to these Christians. Nothing less than those three truths can bring real encouragement to you when the pressure is on and even when death is imminent.

I sat by my dying friend's bedside recently and we together rehearsed these truths - that is what will see a person through.