

**“Unto Death?” – Pr Jim Sprengle – Pentecost 17
September 24, 2023**

- I. **Philippians 1:28-29** [Do not be] ²⁸frightened in anything by your opponents.... ²⁹For 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.”
- II. **I was blessed to attend our church body’s national convention this year.**
 - a. It was a great experience, but the most memorable times came from the Lutheran church bodies we recognized as being in fellowship with us.
 - b. Lutheran bishops and leaders from various countries were represented in this welcome – including Sudan and South Sudan, Finland, Uganda, and Ukraine.
 - i. Listening to their stories, along with their gratitude for the support and connection of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, was very encouraging.
 - ii. The pastor from Ukraine spoke of trips behind enemy lines to do the work of the Gospel – even ending up in the hospital after coming under rocket fire.
 - iii. The pastors from African countries often face pressure and persecution from the Islamic extremists on their borders and within.
 - c. We are not always aware of the many countries that Christians face persecution, intolerance, and even death for their faith.
 - i. You might be surprised to hear that Mexico, El Salvador, and Colombia are on the list because of persecution of Christians.
 - ii. Even in these mostly Christian countries, drug cartels and organized crime silence Christians for speaking out – even murdering them.
 - d. There are many reasons that Christians go through hardships in other countries –
 - i. India is often in the news as its main religion is Hinduism, but violence erupts against churches and Christians.
 - ii. Middle Eastern countries often have Muslim majorities and laws in place that keep Christians from equal opportunities or may not allow any Christian practices and worship at all.
 - iii. Communist countries like China closely watch Christian churches, and often shut down gatherings and tear down buildings if they are not properly permitted and monitored.
 - iv. Finally, even in the Western World, Christianity can face trouble because of “hate speech” laws and a growing intolerance of traditional views of the Bible.
 - v. So, whether it’s Hindus, Muslims, Communists, organized crime, or liberal governments and society, Christians face trouble everywhere.
 - e. An article written by Kristen Waggoner begins,

- i. “A courageous leader once criticized the church hierarchy in Europe. That led to an interrogation, an investigation, and a public trial meant to intimidate all those who shared this leader’s beliefs. No, that isn’t the story of Martin Luther. It’s the ongoing case of Päivi Räsänen, a former Finnish member of Parliament who is now being prosecuted by the state because she dared to speak her Christian views on sexuality.” ¹
- ii. Now, in addition to Dr. Räsänen, Bishop Juhana Pohjola was also charged for publicly backing her up on her comments.
 - 1. He was relieved of his post as Bishop of the state sponsored Lutheran Church, and began his own Lutheran synod, which was brought into fellowship with us in the LCMS at the National Convention I attended.
- iii. All of this began when Dr. Räsänen disagreed with her local church sponsoring a gay pride parade – and she tweeted that this is not God’s will, along with quoting Romans chapter 1.
- iv. For quoting Scripture, Bishop Pohjola and Dr. Räsänen face two years in prison for “agitation against a minority group”, and their final ruling comes back in November of this year.
- f. The very same thing could happen in other “free” countries – like Canada, Australia, New Zealand – and perhaps in time, even here in the U.S.

III. **Paul wrote his letter to the Church in Philippi from Rome.**

- a. He was under house arrest, awaiting his trial for preaching about Jesus.
- b. His hope was that he could continue on preaching and teaching, but either way, he was ready to move forward – in release and missionary journeys, or death and a release into the arms of his Savior Jesus Christ.
- c. He was not afraid of the consequences of speaking boldly in the name of Christ, because he had already been through unbelievable persecution and torture for his boldness.
- d. No matter where he went, he faced danger from the Roman officials, the Jewish leaders, or even pagans who thought his teaching was a threat.
- e. For many and various reasons, Jesus and the teachings of the Bible are a threat to governments, religious leaders, and society.
 - i. Paul says that his imprisonment has encouraged others to be bold in their witness too. (vs 14)
 - ii. But he is also confident that whether he lives or dies, the Gospel will be shared with people, and he is just fine with a death in Jesus.
- f. Then Paul says that followers of Jesus should not fear anything that opposes them, but that the gift of faith and suffering were given to all Christians. (vs 28-29)
 - i. Wait, we were given faith and suffering with our relationship to Jesus?

IV. **No one wants to suffer.**

- a. We are biologically wired to avoid pain and suffering, and it takes a major force to overcome our desire for self-preservation.
- b. Yet, Jesus is our forerunner – the one who leads the way for our lives of faith and trust in the Father – the one who led the way of suffering.
- c. Jesus says in Matthew 5:11 of the Beatitudes, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on My account.” (Matthew 5:11)
 - i. Jesus does not say “if”... He says when you are persecuted... because it is a given – faith in Jesus means we will suffer for Him.
- d. Since the founding of America, Christians have generally been free to quote the Scriptures and preach in Jesus’ name without opposition – but the tide is turning.
- e. Each of us face individual challenges with our witness to Christ and when we need to speak into the growing belief systems that are against God and His will.
 - i. The battle lines are being drawn over sex and marriage, over abortion, over transgenderism and what makes a person male or female, and over what Jesus came to do... encourage people to continue in sin, or transform them to repent and live for Him.
 - ii. The consequences for stating biblical truth, or even standing firm with basic Christian beliefs, held for thousands of years might be:
 1. Rejection – from family or friends or coworkers or clients...
 2. Cancel culture – your business is targeted, your livelihood is taken away, you may receive threats and bad reviews...or posting your place of residence or work for people to harass you or threaten you.
 3. Punished in the workplace – through Human Resources with programs to change or reorient you... or termination.
 4. In the future, laws may require you to use certain language about people, stop you from talking about parts of the Bible openly, or open you to lawsuits from those offended or hurt.
- f. Does this stop us from sharing truth? No! We boldly proclaim the truth – which is that Jesus died and rose again for all sinners – and wants them to return to Him with repentant and contrite hearts.

V. **Jesus isn’t only about loving people, He is about death.**

- a. He wants the death of self – and the death of the old person so that the new one would come forth in newness and life.
- b. He wants the death of the old self, the old Adam, the death of pride and our understanding versus God’s ways... so that we might experience the life that is found in Him alone.
- c. Jesus wants the death of sin and rebellion, the reason He was willing to experience death firsthand on the cross.

- d. In His death, and our death to sin, we are given the gift of forgiveness, life, and salvation – and a powerful sense of peace – because we know that whether we live or whether we die, we honor... and we belong to Jesus Christ.
- e. With that in mind... speak the truth lovingly... boldly share the Gospel in all ways... pray for those who are persecuted... and whenever you face trials and suffering for your faith, remember Jesus, the one who endured the cross to call you His own... Amen.

¹ Kristen Waggoner, "Finland Puts Free Speech on Trial," National Review, August 13, 2023, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2023/08/finland-puts-free-speech-on-trial/>