

MARTYRDOM AND MISSIONS

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“The promises of God are not mainly for this world.” John Piper

We often give passing thought about being “living sacrifices” unto God. We rejoice in life, love, ministry, and family—as we should. However, there is also the reality that we are called to be God’s witnesses. We are to deny ourselves, pick up our cross, and follow Christ... and, in God’s sovereignty, some will follow Him unto the death of martyrdom.

As a church, we have been blessed by God’s graciousness and have had people serve around the globe in relative safety and peace. This safety and security is by God’s grace and His sovereignty. Yet, we must acknowledge that in the sovereignty of God He may just as graciously use our life, even in death, as a testament of His love for all peoples.

In our western Christian culture we often favor a theology of escapism—free of pain, sorrow, tribulation and martyrdom. However, God in His Word speaks differently. The Bible says that the number of martyrs is not yet complete (Revelation 6:11).

For hundreds of years we have enjoyed the blessings of Christianity, but these were often accompanied by the death of courageous believers who laid down their lives for the cause of God’s glory. The blood of these precious saints has watered fields of spiritual harvest, has accelerated the growth of Christianity around the world, and has made the witness of genuine love burn brighter. Martyrdom for Christ’s followers is an inspiration to all Christians. Many times martyrdom has resulted in a greater witness than the life of the martyred saint. It was Tertullian who said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Martyrdom is on the rise, with unprecedented numbers of martyrs in the Twentieth Century.

Autumn Ridge declares that we are a people who unwaveringly pursue salvation for every people, nation, tribe, and tongue unto the glory of God. We are a church that is imbedded in God’s global cause. As we participate in the growth of God’s kingdom on earth, our leaders use godly wisdom to decide when we should cancel a mission trip, enter a mission field or bring a missionary home due to the perceived risk of the situation. When necessary the church leaders shall act with mutual consideration of the church, the team, the field, the missionary, and the agency.

Having stated the above, we must acknowledge, even now, that missions is such a passionate pursuit of the throne of God that we will continue in this pursuit despite any hardships, death, injury, kidnapping, persecution or trouble that our short-term or long-term missionaries experience. We plan to see every missionary return from their ministry; yet, by God’s sovereignty know that we may never see them on earth again. The possibility of martyrdom is a threshold every team member crosses as they go forth from Autumn Ridge into the world. And, should death, injury, kidnapping, persecution or trouble occur, our congregation will not falter in our commitment to mission. We will not second-guess the cost, nor will we second-guess our passion.

We shall not see martyrdom as “a life cut short” but rather as a life “lived fully for God until the last pre-ordained day of life and breath.” We frequently pray, “Father, Your will be done” and God’s will may not prevent the death of a saint, a short-term team member or the loss of a missionary.

This loss is but a glorious testament to God’s loving sovereignty and a call for another person to fill the shoes of the departed on the field of missions. We do not seek death, but when it comes, it testifies of Christ and His Kingdom, mercy, love, and grace. In martyrdom, life is the very thing we gain when we lose our earthly tabernacle.

Nevertheless, we note two important differences in the experience of Christian martyrs and that of the radical Muslim or Buddhist. First, unlike the Buddhist, Christians do not disregard the value of life or the reality of pain. We are living, feeling individuals, separate from our Creator and not simply a thought or ephemeral image in the “great mind.” Second, unlike the radical Muslim, Christians do not believe that martyrdom holds any value for earning salvation nor eternal, sensual reward, and so Christians do not seek out martyrdom.

In fact, the history of the Church reflects that Christians may avoid martyrdom without compromising the Gospel. When Peter was delivered by the angel from prison, he left Jerusalem and went to another place (Acts 12:17). Paul escaped from Damascus during the night when the representative of King Aretas threatened to kill him (2 Cor. 11:32, 33). According to the most reliable Christian tradition, both Peter and Paul eventually died as martyrs when it was not possible for them to escape their tormentors with their faith intact. This lack of fanaticism in the way they lived out their faith and their humble trust in the finished work of Jesus (and not their own religious suffering) demonstrate a radical difference between themselves and martyrs from other world religions. And so as Christians and missionaries, we may choose life, submit to our current realities or find safety through hiding or escape and yet remain true to our Lord.

May God grant us perseverance in missions, grace in life and in death, mercy to any who have raised a hand toward God’s children, and may God alone receive the glory in the reward of our final transformation to life eternal.