

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

Info: (651) 283-0568 Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc www.dtminc.org Today's Date: October 5, 2014

Be Faithful Until Death

by Dan Trygg

“...a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering service to God”

John 16:2

“My eager expectation and hope is that I will not be ashamed about anything, but that now as always, with all boldness, Christ will be highly honored in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For me, living is Christ and dying is gain. ²² Now if I live on in the flesh, this means fruitful work for me...”

Philippians 1:20-22

“And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.”

Revelation 20:4

I turned on the computer, and the news story on the front page was about another Western hostage beheaded by Islamic militants in Syria/Iraq. I clicked on the story, and followed a few links. Weeks ago, I had watched a couple of the other filmed hostage beheadings. In both cases, the film had broken off when the executioner actually started to cut at the prisoner's throat. There was apparently some question, even by forensic experts as to whether these people were actually killed. There was little blood, and the noises made off camera were “inconsistent” with what these experts would expect. Again, the camera cut away when the executioner started, but this time, when it cut back afterward, there was plenty of blood, as well as the recognizable head of the poor man who had been killed. I followed up on a few more links and witnessed a couple of Christians being beheaded by a crowd of ISIL militants. There were at least a hundred or more spectators crowding around these two men, bound behind their backs and blindfolded. Almost all of the militants had their cellphones out, taking video of the proceedings. One fellow, very large and in charge, conducted the affair. He gathered the spectators around, took the blindfold off one man, dragged him over to the center, pushed him over, face down, and began cutting at his neck with an eight or ten inch long knife. He worked feverishly, back and forth, back and forth, repeatedly cutting, until the head was totally separated from the man's body. It took maybe 30 seconds. He then picked it up, and held it over his head so everyone could see. They cheered. Then they grabbed the other guy, and did the same to him. This time the big man gave his knife to another fellow. It was obviously a training experience. The mob frenzy was sickening. Everyone was cheering and excited.

This prompted me to do a Google search on “Why do Islamic militants behead Christians?” I have read things on both sides of the debate. Some say, “There are just a few selected passages that would suggest beheading, and they were statements made in a time of war. They are not to be considered as being consistent with the central teachings of Islam.” Others make much of the most obvious passages, quoting them for the obvious vivid description. As I did my internet searching, **I discovered that decapitation has been a preferred method of capital punishment by many cultures.** In fact, the word “capital” comes from the Latin word for “head”, “*caput*”. It was used by the Germans, Finnish, English, French, Vikings from Scandinavia, Romans, Greeks, Japanese, Chinese, etc. What was surprising is that **many of these countries used decapitation up until the mid-1900's!** It was thought to be a relatively quick and painless method to dispatch enemies or criminals worthy of death. In all the world today, however, the only country that still uses this method for legal execution of criminals is Saudi Arabia. This is important background for us to understand, because to us with our American 21st century sensibilities, it seems like such a savage and barbaric method. **That having been said, the Islamic extremists of ISIL are definitely using this methodology for two reasons: (1.) It was the method used by Muhammad and mentioned in the Quran.** (Again, this was a key method of warfare at the time, no matter *what* side you were on.) As devotees of Muhammad, trying to duplicate or follow his methodology in war, it is not surprising that they would use this method. Muhammad was ruthless in war, at times, as well, so if they isolate those passages from everything else he said or did, they are simply following 7th century stratagems of war. **(2.) They are using this method of decapitation to instill fear and intimidation in the hearts of their opponents.** Again, this was the practice in warfare many times throughout history. In the 7th century, warriors had scimitars and long swords. To behead someone was a relatively quick process. One article I read attributed the modern use of the short knife to one of the terrorists of 9-11. It was a matter of practicality, in that anyone can easily get a hunting knife or kitchen knife, but it was also intended to be more violent to increase the intimidation factor.

What is important to point out is that, in spite of some passages to the contrary in the Quran, Christians and certain ethnic groups are being systematically hunted down and executed. This brand of fundamentalist Islam is attracting followers from all over the world, and they are sweeping through Iraq and Syria. **We need to be in prayer for our brothers and sisters who are being killed, tortured, enslaved and abused.** There are also refugee camps where families who have fled their homes have found refuge. *They also need our financial support.*

Also, **it is vital that we condition our minds to the reality that persecution is *not* foreign to being a Christian. In fact, quite the opposite, we should *expect* it.** Jesus said that if the world hated Him, it will hate us, as well. It doesn't need a good reason to hate us. It doesn't matter if we have done something offensive, or not. Jesus said, "If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (Jn. 15:19-20). In fact, Jesus said that the word was fulfilled, "They hated Me *without* a cause" (Jn. 15:25b). **There doesn't need to be a reason, an act of offense. There is a spiritual warfare that is going on around us, and Christians are in the enemy's sights.** Paul wrote about this in Ephesians 6. He said we are to "be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For *our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.* Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm" (Eph. 6:10-13). Satan wants us *dead*, or *ineffective as Christians*.

Why does persecution happen to some, and not others? We don't really know, but it happens to the most mature and seasoned veterans of the faith, as well as to the most innocent and vulnerable. God has not shared with us the reasons why suffering and evil seem to triumph, at times. We are to trust Him, regardless. **Persecution has happened throughout history.** Jesus was persecuted, and executed on the cross, a particularly painful and humiliating death. Every one of the apostles was persecuted. Only John died of old age. The rest were martyred for their faith. **Throughout history there have been waves of persecution that have risen up against the faithful,** either by secular authorities, or by religious opponents. **Throughout history there have also been countless incidents of religious oppression and physical violence against faithful believers.**

Jesus challenged us, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Lk. 9:23). **Everyone who heard *those* words knew it was a commitment to Christ, *no matter what!* Suffering and death were easily part of what many Christians were knowingly signing up for when choosing to follow Christ.**

The apostle Paul was no stranger to persecution (II Cor. 11:23,24). In his last letter to Timothy, he was in prison again for preaching the gospel. He encouraged Timothy, "...you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, persecutions, *and* sufferings, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra; what persecutions I endured, and out of them all the Lord delivered me! And indeed, *all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*" (II Tim. 3:10-12). **Did you catch *that*? That statement is as much a promise as any other promise in the Bible.** *All* who desire to live good-devotedly in Christ Jesus *will* be persecuted. You can count on it. It *will* happen. **If is *not* happening, or has *never* happened to you, then maybe you need to reevaluate the depth of your spiritual walk.** If you are living as the light of the world (Matt. 5:14-16), the powers of darkness, and people who love darkness, will hate you (cf. Jn. 3:19,20), and will oppose you and even may try to put out your light! Listen to Paul, again. He knew that the time of his departure from this life was at hand. He had been delivered from the lion's mouth before, but even if not in this circumstance, he still wrote, "The Lord will deliver me away from every evil deed, and will save me unto His heavenly kingdom; to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen." (II Tim. 4:18). **The evil deeds are only temporary; what is important was to be assured of one's eternal reward.** Shortly after writing this, Paul himself was beheaded for his faith.

Several years earlier, Paul had written the words from Philippians 1 at the top of this sheet. **Whether by life or by death, he just wanted to bring glory to Christ.** He knew that to die, ...to depart and be with Christ..., would be a much greater experience than anything this earth could afford. At that time, he was allowed to remain and serve Christ effectively for several more years. Now, he rests with Christ and the community of believers who are there in His presence. He will be among the company of those John saw in Revelations 20, as will those two Christian brothers who were executed in Syria. **Those who had been martyred for their faith will rise triumphantly when Christ returns, and will reign with Him in victory. All those who had opposed them will either be defeated, or will have themselves come to faith in Christ.** Many times in church history, it has been the peace and confidence of martyrs in the face of death, that God has used to penetrate the hearts of those who even were persecuting them.

When I first gave my life to serve Jesus Christ, one of the books I read was **Foxe's Christian Martyrs**. I think this is such an important read for us. Again, it is vital that we condition our minds to the reality that persecution is *not* foreign to being a Christian. What Foxe did was to recount the stories of many who suffered and died for their faith, showing that **many times God gives unusual grace and strength to face persecution.** A more modern book is **Jesus Freaks**, a compilation of martyr stories from the present day. As you read what others faced, may you be strengthened to be bold, and trust God to walk with you through whatever may come to you.