



5<sup>th</sup> November 2023 | All Saints Day

*Being prepared to suffer for the name of Christ.*



I'd like to start my message with a question.

It is an uncomfortable question – but one that's totally appropriate for today – the *International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church*.

*"How prepared are you to suffer for the name of Jesus Christ?"*

For most of us, we'd say, 'Of course!' If it ever came to that, I'd stand up for my faith in Jesus Christ."

The problem is it is very easy to say that when it is only hypothetical.

According to world-wide reports, "about 360 million Christians suffer persecution for their faith" and this number is only ever described as being on the rise.

I recently watched a movie entitled *The Least of These* showing the story of Graham Staines, an Australian missionary who had travelled to India in 1965 to minister amongst the lepers.

In early January of 1999, Graham and his two sons were murdered by a large mob of militant Hindus. After a day healing the sick in a remote leper camp, a mob attacked setting fire to their car in while they slept. When the fire finally cooled, they found Graham's arms wrapped around the bodies of his sons.

But it was the response of Graham's wife Gladys, and daughter Esther, which sparked attention throughout India.<sup>1</sup>

Gladys said, "I have only one message for the people of India. I'm not bitter. Neither am I angry. But I have one great desire: that each citizen of this country should establish a personal relationship with Jesus Christ who gave his life for their sins ... let us burn hatred and spread the flame of Christ's love."



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/19990208-staines-killing-murder-of-australian-missionary-and-his-two-sons-in-orissa-shocks-india-780092-1999-02-07>

When his daughter Esther was asked how she felt about the murder of her dad, 13-year-old said "I praise the Lord that He found my father worthy to die for Him."

I don't know many young people who would respond to like that.

Let me ask you again: *How prepared are you to suffer for Christ?*

When the early church went through a time of intense persecution, Peter wrote to them to encourage them, saying

**13** Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? **14** But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened." **15** But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, **16** keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. **17** For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil." (1 Peter 3:13-17)

Peter shows there are two possibilities for Christians living in a hostile world.

First, there is the possibility that we won't suffer at all. After all, "Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?" (v13).

The answer normally is, "No one." If you are truly eager to do good in the sight of God and people, you should have nothing to fear. And most of the time for most of us, that's how life works out.

But that doesn't always happen, and certainly didn't in case of Graham and his sons.

So, Peter goes on to say, "But even if you should suffer for what is right" (v14a) there is a godly way to respond to such suffering.

In fact, Jesus guaranteed that his disciples would suffer persecution for following him (John 15:18-25).

So, how does Peter tell us to respond?

The first is totally opposite to how we would normally respond: We told by Jesus to **Cheer Up!**

We read today Jesus words, "God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way." (Matthew 5:11)

That's why Peter says, "*But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed*"(v. 14a-b). Peter is rephrasing Jesus words, when he said, "*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*"(Matthew 5:10).

Next, Peter says we are to **Give Up** our fear!

"*Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened*"(v14c). This part of the verse comes from Isaiah 8:12 where the prophet encouraged the frightened people of Israel as they cowered in fear as the mighty Assyrian army threatened to rampage their city.

Isaiah's message must have seemed crazy: "Don't fear this mighty army. Though they have far more soldiers, you have something they don't. You have God on your side and our God equals more than all your enemies put together. So don't be afraid for God is with you!

Next, Peter says we are to **Lift Up** our hearts!

"*But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord*"(v15a). Peter emphasizes that we must lift up Christ and worship Him as our Lord, and we must do that even when it is not popular or easy.

Those who make Jesus Christ their Lord need not fear what people can do to them.

Graham's life shows this, just as many other martyrs do.

In this world we will experience suffering and persecution. But if we set our hearts on Jesus Christ as our Lord, we can rest well at night, knowing that nothing can touch us that does not first pass through His loving, sovereign hands.

We all know there is a long line of martyrs who loved Christ more than their own lives – these are the ones who John saw in his vision we read earlier.

Before trouble came, they settled it in their own hearts that only Christ matters.

Ponder those three words for a moment. Only Christ matters.

In light of eternity, could anything in this world matter more than Jesus Christ?

We need to hear this, to repeat it to each other, and to preach it and teach it to our children and grandchildren. We will never be ready for suffering until we lift Christ up and set Him apart as Lord of all.

Then Peter tells us we are to **Speak Up!**

*"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect"*(v15b).

We need to know what we believe, why we believe it, and we should be ready, willing and able to explain what we believe to someone else.

He not only emphasizes what we say, but also how we say it.

We must be gentle. It's the word for meekness again. It means to be winsome, kind and gracious in our dealings with those who do not yet believe.

This means listening to people, paying attention to them, looking at them while we talk to them, listening for the details, remembering names, and letting them tell us about their spiritual journey.

It also means that we don't try to cram everything we know into one conversation. Most people come to Christ slowly, over a period of time, as they understand more and more of the truth. Better to give them bits and pieces than to try to force the whole message on them if they aren't ready to hear it.

Lastly, Peter says we are to **Shape Up!**

*"Keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander"*(v16). This means living such a noble life that if people criticize us for the way we live, they actually have to lie about us to do it.

### **Application | So, how does all this talk of suffering comfort us?**

Even in Australia we are hurtling toward the risk that every follower of Jesus Christ could face ridicule, lawsuits and possibly even imprisonment.

Those in other countries, will be called to die for their faith.

But that is all the devil can do to us. He has no other ammunition to use against us. He has done all he can do to Graham Staines and to his sons. Death was his final blow.

But for the disciple of Jesus Christ, death is not the end. If we clean out the wax in our spiritual ears we'll hear the sound of joyous laughter from the other side of the grave. They are singing praise to Jesus for all eternity.

And that makes us triumphant in life and in death. Amen.