

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A Theology of Martyrdom **Acts 7:51-60**

Keywords: Acts 7, Suffering, Persecution, Martyr, Will of God, Goodness of God

PowerPoint Presentation included: none

SermonAudio Blurb: Persecution and martyrdom are frightening for many as they see the many changes occurring in America today. What once seemed so far away is now quite near and some are even now experiencing a level of persecution they never imagined. But this is not something new. The bible is clear about it and its certainty. So how ought the Christian view this? That is the goal of this message.

I. Introduction.

- A. We return our attention to Acts 7. It was back in February that we last were in this book so a quick reminder is necessary.
1. Stephen is a godly man chosen by the people in Acts 6 to help resolve a key controversy. Godly and full of the Holy Spirit is how he is described.
 2. He was also a teacher and evangelist. At the end of Acts 6 he was performing miracles and were speaking to many people about Jesus Christ. This created a point of great tension and they spread lies about him.
 3. He is brought before the Council of religious leaders to give an account and chapter 7 gives us his speech. What then occurs is the longest recorded sermon/speech in the book of Acts. A masterful message that is surprisingly not specifically about Jesus Christ. There are two main themes in this speech.
 - a. The first is that God has faithfully given Israel faithful prophets/teachers to point them to God and to sustain them.
 - b. The second is that Israel, in turn, rejects these prophets/teachers and turns to idols, even turning good things into idols.
- B. This is Christianity—true Christianity on display.
1. We see the power of the Holy Spirit in convicting people in vs 54.
 2. Truth is brutal to those who hate it.
 3. Truth is brutal to those who love it.
 4. The Holy Spirit takes you and makes you alive in a way nothing in all of creation can do.

M i s s i o D e i F e l l o w s h i p

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

5. And here we see one other aspect of Christianity. Death is different.
- C. And this hope and life is found only in Jesus Christ through the gospel.
 1. His death on the cross on our behalf for sin. His resurrection from the dead, securing life for all who are His. His power and glory overcoming all the enemies we face.
 2. We are not called to earn our way into heaven. We are not called to live in servile fear that we may not make it. We simply place our hope and trust in God's Man, Jesus who did it all.
 3. And now, in that freedom and life, we can simply follow His footsteps.
- D. And that is the focus of today—where following Jesus can lead.
 1. John 15:17-27.
 2. There are times of great peace and rest for the Church of Jesus Christ but those are actually rare in its history. The norm is persecution. And persecution is what is becoming more normal to the American Church and it is wise for us to see this and understand it.
- E. I want to give us four principles related to persecution and martyrdom that might help you begin to think about what it means to follow Jesus and to understand better what is happening around you.

II. A Basic Theology of Martyrdom.

- A. Principle #1: God has ordained persecution and death in conjunction with the gospel.
 1. Matthew 10:22.
 2. 1 Peter 4:12-14.
 3. 2 Timothy 3:12.

M i s s i o D e i F e l l o w s h i p

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

- B. Principle #2: Our task is not to fret over the possibility of persecution and death but to be found faithful to our task

- C. Principle #3: Persecution and martyrdom are a means to reveal the genuineness of one's faith.
 - 1. Matthew 13:1-23.

 - 2. 1 Peter 1:6-9.

 - 3. Romans 8:17.

- D. Principle #4: Persecution is a tool of Satan not just of flesh and blood.
 - 1. In the book of Revelation (2:10) we see Jesus warning and encouraging the church in Smyrna that the devil was about to cast some of them into prison.

 - 2. Luke 21:10-19.

III. Conclusion.

- A. Only the power of saving grace enables a Christian to endure to the end.
- B. In the death of a believer Satan is, in a sense, trampled under foot again. And this is repeated every time one is faithful to the end.
- C. The world is a prison filled that entraps us with its many vices and temptings. Over time we lose sight of the walls that are erected by sin and death and we forget that there is a vast new world on the outside. We trudge in circles around

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

those walls just existing. Like fools we amass small troves of so-called treasure that cannot bring freedom. We fight and hate and murder and lie to keep our little life alive.

- D. Polycarp, a well known Bishop as well as a disciple of the Apostle John died at the hands of the Roman government.
1. He was bound and burned at the stake but even that was not enough. As he burned they repeatedly stabbed him with a spear.
 2. His crime? He refused to burn a small bit of incense to the Roman emperor. He was 86.
 3. His final words are famously recorded, “Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior? You threaten me with a fire that burns for a season, and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the wicked.”
 4. But what stands out with this death, and countless other ones over the centuries, is how they were willing to do so. They did not seek it, but they were convinced that the bible was true. And the bible declares that God is in control and therefore this suffering is no accident.
 5. Here is what was written by the person who chronicled Polycarp’s martyrdom. It is to the people over whom Polycarp had served as bishop.
 - a. “We wish you, brethren, all happiness, while you walk according to the doctrine of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; with whom be glory to God the Father and the Holy Spirit, for the salvation of His holy elect, after whose example the blessed Polycarp suffered, following in whose steps may we too be found in the kingdom of Jesus Christ!” (*Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Ch. 22)
 - b. Not a word of fear or to flee. Not a word of despair or of bitterness. But a desire that they be happy. But this happiness was not the type that this age with its passing fancies can produce, but for a moment. But the happiness found in the knowledge that they knew God and, more importantly, God knew them and had saved them through His beloved Son.

M i s s i o D e i F e l l o w s h i p

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Benediction

May the God who gave us the Word sanctify us in it so that we might find ourselves strengthened in the truth, humble of heart, able to encourage one another toward love and good deeds, especially as we see the day of our Lord's return drawing nearer. Amen.