

Title: “Witness in the Last Days”

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Luke 21:13, 2 Thess. 3:6-13

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Service Readings: Mal. 4:1–6 , 2 Thess. 3:6–13, Luke 21:5–28

In these last days, Paul urges us to maintain Christian discipline, even as the world seems to breaking down around us. Do not grow discouraged for this time of chaos is a time of opportunity to preach the Gospel.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

“Before all this,” Jesus said, “they will lay their hands on you and persecute you... you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. ... You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends. Some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name’s sake.” It wasn’t an empty warning:

- Peter and John were flogged
- Stephen was stoned
- James, the brother of John, was executed
- Paul was beaten and imprisoned.
- Peter, Paul, and most of the other apostles were eventually executed.

And countless others followed them – ordinary believers, unnamed in Scripture. Real people with real lives on the line who suffered real consequences. They had families; they had friends. They had people who loved them – people who watched in horror as they were tortured and killed.

These martyrs knew the cost required of them. They knew the risk they faced. None of that came as a surprise. They had only to look around to see other Christians suffering to know that the path they chose would be a path that could lead to their grave. No one forced them into this decision. Indeed, there were probably many who tried to stop them, to talk them out of following Jesus. And yet, they chose him. Why? What was in it for them? Nothing earthly. Well, nothing earthly except a cross. And a cross they did bear – in many different ways. But even during their times of suffering, they continued to hold firm to the conviction that what they were suffering for, what they were dying for held immense value – value beyond any earthly wealth.

But was that enough for them to endure? Why did they not just hide, keep quiet their faith to the outside world? Salvation didn’t depend on their suffering. They could have realized eternal life through the old age of their muted hearts and closed lips. What motivated them to risk their lives? And what motivated them to endure as they suffered? Jesus answers that in these same verses. He says this:

¹³ This will be your opportunity to bear witness. ¹⁴ Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, ¹⁵ for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.

An opportunity to bear witness. As an aside, and only because it will enrich this passage, the Greek word used for witness is μαρτύριον. It is where we get the word martyr from. Jesus says, “you will suffer for

my sake and your suffering will turn out for you a witness, [a martyr] – one that may cost you your life.” In other words, God would turn their persecution into proclamation, their trials into testimony. *Through* their suffering on account of Jesus, the world would bear witness to God’s power and grace. And these early Christians believed this to be true. They trusted that God would use their sufferings to proclaim the salvation that Jesus earned for all mankind through *his* suffering and death.

Their faith was a cruciform faith, a faith that was a reflection of the same faith Jesus displayed as he journeyed to the cross. It was a faith that trusted the Father above all things and *for* all things. It was a faith that was sparked by the Holy Spirit and forged through Christian suffering. It was a faith that clung to the promises of Jesus –that because of *his* suffering, because of *his* death, and because *his* resurrection, their suffering would end and they would experience eternal life in his presence. But while they suffered, their suffering was not in vein – it would be used by God to gather and claim his children.

But now we might ask the difficult question. What about us?

We are Christians, too. We bear the same name. We confess the same Christ. We are baptized into the same death and resurrection of the same Lord. And yet...

Where they faced prisons and stones, we often retreat at the thought of social discomfort.
Where they risked their lives, we hesitate to risk our reputations.
Where they opened their mouths before governors and kings, we sometimes fall silent in front of coworkers and neighbors.
Where they prayed for courage, we often pray for ease.
Where they saw suffering as a cross to carry, we see inconvenience as a burden to avoid.

And the truth is, we do not hide because we lack faith in Christ’s love. We hide because we lack confidence in his presence. We forget the promise that Jesus makes in this very passage: “I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.”

These early martyrs were not strong because they were braver than us, or better Christians than we are. It wasn’t because their faith was more solid than ours. They did not choose suffering because they had stronger wills than we have. Not in the slightest. The strength they had was given to them: The Word was living in them! The Spirit was speaking through them! Christ’s love was sustaining them! And it was all given to them in perfect time and in perfect strength. They sustained because Christ sustained them.

And that Christ is *our* Christ, too! It is not about the measure of your faith but the presence of your faith—the existence of it. And that too is given to you by God! So when you find yourself weak, timid, hesitant, the answer is not to muster up your own courage. The answer is not to pretend that you are a martyr. The answer is to return to the same source that they did for endurance: The Word that speaks promise into our fear, the Spirit that strengthens our heart, the body and blood of Christ that offers us forgiveness when we fall, and the resurrection where suffering gives way to life. The early believers did not endure because they were strong; they endured because Christ was in them. And the same Christ is in you. So take heart. Your life, too is a testimony.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, who endured the cross and despised its shame for our salvation, strengthen us now to bear witness in these last days. When our hearts tremble and our courage falters, fix our eyes on You—our risen and reigning King. Through your Word and by your Spirit, make us steadfast, unshaken, and faithful unto the end, that our lives may point others to your saving grace.