

“THE WORLD PUSHES BACK AGAINST JESUS”

Psalm 71:1-14, 2 Corinthians 6:3-10, Acts 19:23-41

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“In a recent interview, an Indonesian Christian, Petrus, made this startling statement:

‘Because we have Jesus, it is not difficult to be a Christian, although there are many oppressions.’ While his statement seems obvious to many of us, following Christ has required great sacrifice for Petrus.

“An angry, radical Muslim mob surrounded the church building, breaking windows and chanting their hatred for Christians. Petrus’ father, the church pastor, was inside with Petrus’ mother, sister, cousin, and a church worker. His father tried to calm the mob, but they would not leave. He retreated into the church to pray, asking God’s protection and help.

“The mob, seeking blood, lit the building on fire, screaming chants as they waited to attack anybody who came out. Indonesian police were too afraid to take action. The military were not available. It was another church burning in a nation where more than five hundred (500) churches have been burned in the past ten years.

“When Petrus arrived at the scene hours later, the church and parsonage were ashes. The bodies of his love ones were burned almost beyond recognition.

“Later, a government official apologized to Petrus but urged him not to seek revenge. Petrus’ desire is not for revenge but love. He wants to see Muslims in his country won to Christ’s kingdom.

“Persecution is often the final battleground in the fight between natural instinct and spiritual conviction. Instinct is interested in self-preservation. Conviction is above our own interests. Instinct says to take revenge upon our perpetrators. Conviction reminds us of the spiritual needs concerning those who persecute us. Most of us, after seeing our loved ones murdered for their beliefs, would find it instinctively difficult to share Petrus’ convictions.

However, the alternative to following Christ was more unbearable for Petrus. How could he **not** follow Christ? His story proves it is possible for our convictions to overrule our instincts. But this is only when our natural inclinations are reversed by the compelling love of Christ - a victory amid the battleground of persecution.”<sup>1</sup>

Having faith in Jesus Christ is not always a safe thing for us to do. We have been called by God to be His faithful children, and to follow Him all of our days. But that choice we make to be a follower of Jesus is contrary to the things of this world, so we can expect that the world will often refuse to tolerate us. The world often responds to our faith in violence and rejection, but our hearts and minds should be firmly planted upon following Jesus, no matter what happens to us.

Petrus’ family gave their lives as a witness to their faith in Jesus. They did not shrink from death, knowing that God was with them, and that they would be received into the Kingdom of God when their lives ended here. That is the hope we have as followers of Jesus. But the choice to continue to reach out to those who persecute us is a difficult one. We naturally want revenge or restitution for what has been done to us.

King David gives us encouraging words to keep close to our hearts. During the times when his enemies were all around him, he cried out to the Lord for his help. He says, “*In You, Lord, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame. In Your righteousness, rescue me and deliver me; turn Your ear to me and save me. Be my rock of refuge, to which I can always go; give the command to save me, for You are my rock and my fortress. Deliver me, my God, from the hands of the wicked, from the grasp of those who are evil and cruel*” (Ps. 71:1-4).

God never promises us that our lives will be easy and without struggle and strife. In fact,

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<sup>1</sup> (Voice of the Martyrs, *Extreme Devotion*, [Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2001] pg. 39)

Jesus told His disciples *“you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of Me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved”* (Matthew 24:9-13).

That’s Jesus’ desire for us, to stand firm in our faith, not afraid of what the world can do to us, but confident in what God has already done for us, preparing a place for us in His house. We’ve got to remember that this is not our eternal home. Our eternal home comes after we finish this journey on earth, and the decision we make about Jesus determines our eternal home. Those who claim Jesus and live for Him receive eternal life; those who reject Jesus and follow the world will receive eternal death (Matthew 25:45-46).

The Apostle Paul encourages us to endure the things of this world and remain faithful to Jesus so that we might find His help throughout our lives. Our lesson of 2 Corinthians 6:3-10 gives us a list of all that Paul endured, yet he remained faithful, and in that faithfulness, brought many more to faith in Jesus Christ. So he encourages us to *“put no stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited”* (2 Cor. 6:3).

But even then, that will not mean that the world will not turn on us. The world will hate us because of our faith in Christ Jesus. It may be because of the perceived loss of income, the perceived loss of power or authority, or the perceived loss of status or importance. But we, as Christians, will be the ones that the world goes after when something changes or falls apart.

Listen to what Paul and his companions faced as they finished up their ministry in Ephesus. This is Acts 19:23-41. (READ Acts 19:23-41)

Paul was teaching the people of Ephesus and the people of Asia about the love of God

through Jesus Christ. He was explaining what God had done through Jesus to bring about salvation from our sins, that He died on the cross as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Jesus claimed all of our sins upon Himself while He was on the cross, becoming so vile and sinful in God's eyes that God could not look at Him anymore. That is why Jesus cried out, "*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*" (Mark 15:34). "*God made Him who had **no sin** to be **sin** for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God*" (2 Cor. 5:21). Therefore we need no other god but the Lord our God, the Father, and of Jesus Christ our Savior.

However this infringed upon the income of those who were making idol gods under the guise of worshipping the pagan goddess, Artemis. With so many people coming to put their trust in Jesus as the only true Savior and King, and as they were giving up their faith and trust in the gods made by human hands, these artisans were losing money, not selling their idols as they once had. Faith in Jesus was putting their businesses in jeopardy, so they gathered together under the direction of Demetrius, and started a riot, grabbing Gaius and Aristarchus, traveling companions of Paul, and dragging them into the theater to make a spectacle of them and to down grade Christianity. They wanted to put an end to this new religion that was stealing from them.

I tell you folks, once Jesus gets in the way of another person's business, and threatens their income source, watch out how violent they become in order to protect their assets. To get in between a man and his money is dangerous business, even if the intent is to bring Salvation to their souls. Paul was proclaiming Jesus as being greater than any pagan god, even of Artemis. "The Ephesian Artemis was ... a (fertile) mother; ... a goddess of fertility in man and beast and vegetation ... Her worship was not confined to Ephesus, but was practiced in nearly all the cities of Asia, in many places on the Greek mainland, in the South of Gaul, in Syria, and in Rome itself; so that there is no exaggeration in the description of her magnificence as one '*whom all*

*Asia and the world worship*’ (Acts 19:27). It is probable that her primary image, which was preserved in the sanctuary of the temple in Ephesus, was a meteorite (Acts 19:35: ‘*the sacred stone that fell from the sky*’); but she was usually represented in sculpture as a female figure with multiple breasts, with lions, bulls, and rams worked in relief upon her shoulders and legs, with a bee just above her feet, and her head surmounted by a turret-crown...The ‘silver shrines of Artemis’ made by Demetrius (Acts 19:24) were not (bodily) images but were probably replicas of the primitive sanctuary which was replaced by the great temple of the later period.”<sup>2</sup> She was a very popular pagan deity that was worshipped by thousands.

At first it was no big deal for Paul to share Jesus with the people because not that many were interested. But in the two years that Paul was ministering in Ephesus, “*all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the Word of the Lord*” (Acts 19:10), and many were turning to follow Jesus.

Then, after the Sceva sons’ fiasco with the demon, trying to cast it out by invoking the Name of the Lord Jesus (19:13), the Name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor (19:17), and many people began to convert to Christianity.

This is what got Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen agitated. They saw the explosion of Christianity happening right there in their own city, and instead of becoming followers of Jesus, they stuck true to their pagan religion and worship of Artemis.

A main competitor had come to town and was stealing all of their clients from them, they thought. In order to stop this snowball effect, they had to do something! So they caused a riot and got everyone riled up.

Sounds like the riots we’ve seen in the recent years, doesn’t it? And like any other riot,

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<sup>2</sup> (Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, Volume 1 A-D [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985] pg. 242)

*“some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there”* (19:32). But one thing is true, had Paul gone to the theater to address the people, all of the hatred and animosity and violence would have turned against him, and it would not have been pretty. It was a good thing that the Christian disciples and Asian officials who were friends of Paul, kept him from going. It would not have been pretty.

The same thing happens when we confront the godlessness and evil in our own society, today. If you stand up against the vocal opponents of Christianity, severe repercussions happen. But instead of responding in revenge or anger, the crowds need to be addressed in love, showing the irrationality of what is being presented with truth and love.

Today, anyone standing up against the transgender mindset is quickly ridiculed, or maligned, or blacklisted, or even attacked. Yet more and more young women are standing up against boys in girls’ sports, boys in girl’s locker rooms, and boys stealing trophies and awards away from girls by identifying as a girl.

Anyone who stood up against the “black lives matter” mindset quickly saw repercussions, too. Of course black lives matter! But not only do black lives matter, but EVERY LIFE MATTERS, from conception to natural death. Everyone has value and purpose. So that means we fight for the rights of people of every color, every race, every nationality, every man, woman, and child, and every religion. We don’t have to agree with them, but we love them enough to share the love of Jesus with them and help guide them to eternal life.

So we fight for the lives of the unborn. We fight for life and peace between ALL people by showing love and respect and dignity to each individual. We fight for the safety and security of all countries and people groups. But as we do that, it becomes dangerous as soon as we begin even talking about it. Someone is bound to misinterpret what you say. Someone is bound to

disagree with what you believe. Someone is bound to respond in a way that brings danger to those around them. As soon as you stand up against the popular norm as a Christian, the world immediately turns against you and does its best to take you out.

So it takes great courage and endurance to stand up against the tide of evil in our world today. But that's what we are called to do as followers of Jesus. We are to live in such a way as to demonstrate the love and respect and salvation given to us through Jesus Christ. If we don't tell others about our faith, how will they come to believe in anything but what they've been indoctrinated in? The world will push back against the followers of Jesus, but we must not give up, or give in, or abandon our faith just because it gets hard for us. Jesus wants us to remain strong witnesses for Him so that all those around us come to know that there is salvation in His Name, that there is forgiveness for our sins in His Name, and that there is eternal life for all those who will claim His Name and follow Him.

I admire and applaud the Christian men and women standing up for the Way, the Truth and the Life while serving as leaders of our nation. There is so much hatred being thrown at those who not only proclaim faith in Jesus, but who live for Jesus as they serve our nation. The worldly want nothing more than to belittle them, malign them, badger them and stand up in their face and proclaim them enemies of the United States. When Christians stand up to eliminate fraud, speak out against the wrongs of our society, and work to bring Christian values back into our society, that steps on many toes of the ones who have been taking advantage of the government to get as much money from it as possible. And when it comes to separating money from anyone in the name of righteousness and justice, the world pushes back against Jesus and demands their elimination.

I admire and applaud Christian men and women standing up to the wickedness and evil

taking place in their schools and communities. They are working hard to replace the “anything goes” mentality with order and Christian principles. They are speaking out about the indoctrination that their children are getting to go against the laws of God, and they are demanding changes that reflect goodness, and integrity, and fairness, and godliness. They are sharing the teaching of Jesus so that children and youth and young adults can find hope and life and genuine love in their lives. They are stepping up to become mentors and shepherds and leaders who want to increase the abundance of God’s blessings in the lives of those who are hurting and confused.

We are encouraged to stand strong in our faith as followers of Jesus wherever we go and whatever we do. The Bible tells us to be courageous and not to fear, because when we are seeking to follow the Lord Jesus in all His ways, He will go with us to guide us and use us to touch the hearts and lives of all of those around us. And when we seek the Lord in all our ways, no matter what happens around us, we can trust that God will use every situation to bring honor and glory to Him. We must remain faithful to Jesus above all else.

So be strong and courageous in your faith so that those around you might see the work of the Lord Jesus in them. Let’s pray.

Father, You have called each of us to be a follower of Jesus. You know how hard that can be, for Jesus faced it, too. Yet He called us to follow Him every step of our lives. Help us to be encouraged by those who have gone before us in great faith in You, so that we might follow their examples and be living witnesses for Jesus, no matter what might come up against us. Give us the courage to be true to You, Jesus, in all we say and do, so that we might work diligently to share the Word of the Lord everywhere we go. Guide us and direct our ways, Lord, for we pray this in Jesus’ great and powerful Name. AMEN.