

The Faithful Witness (John 18:12-27)

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Religious persecution is a real thing and Christians are no exception. According to the Open Doors USA® 2021 World Watch List, 340 million Christians live in “places where they experience high levels of persecution and discrimination.” 1 in 6 in Africa; 2 in 5 in Asia, and 1 in 12 in Latin America. 4,761 Christians were killed for their faith, most of them in Nigeria. 4,488 churches and other Christian buildings were attacked. 4,277 believers detained without trial, arrested, sentenced, or imprisoned.

The US is not on the Top 50 list of most difficult nations to follow Jesus. That’s a gift we should never take for granted! But that doesn’t mean we’re exempt from cultural pressure to downplay or compromise the testimony of our faith. The exclusivity of the gospel, the reality that there is only one way to God, isn’t popular. Contending for a biblical view of gender and sexuality in a school classroom will garner more enemies than friends. Insisting that all people, whether your skin is black, brown, or white, have the same sinful nature, the same need for a Savior to rescue us from ourselves, will not win you praise on the evening news.

To be a Christian is to be and feel like an exile, a stranger in a foreign land. The kingdom of this world has yet to become the kingdom of our Lord. And if our Lord Jesus Christ was rejected and oppressed on account of his faithfulness to the Father when he walked among us, we shouldn’t be surprised when those who follow him experience the same sort of dismissal, persecution, and injustice.

So how should we respond as it gets harder, not easier, to be a faithful witness in our own nation? The biblical answer is not to take back Washington for Jesus’ sake as if spiritual opposition could be silenced through political muscle. No. A biblical response starts with fixing our eyes on Jesus, our Great High Priest, who is faithful where we are not, who knows our weakness, who isn’t surprised by our fear of man, and who makes a way for us to be forgiven and restored even when we hide or deny the truth of God’s work in our life.

The middle section of John 18 is another sandwich of sorts. The context of whole is opposition from the world against Jesus and his followers. In the first part, Peter is unfaithful. In the last part, Peter is unfaithful. But in the middle, in the midst of human unfaithfulness, Jesus remains faithful. He is the faithful witness and therein

lies our hope, especially when we, like Peter, stumble and fall. When we, like Peter and Jesus, experience opposition on account of our faith, there are four things we need to remember.

1) JESUS ENDURED THE GREATER INJUSTICE (vv. 12-14)

Ch. 18 opens with one of Jesus' professing followers, betraying the Lord in the dark of night. After a moment of drama where Peter attempts to rescue Jesus by force, v. 12 records the final outcome: "So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound him," and brought him before the Jewish high priest.

Friends, the world has never witnessed a greater injustice than the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of the Son of God. There has never been a greater abuse of human authority. There has never been a more sinister expression of enmity or oppression. You will never have a more grievous experience of persecution, Christian, than what your God endured for your sake.

To think we bound the hands of God himself! It's the unspeakable audacity of sin. It's the same rebellious attitude we demonstrate whenever we attempt to impose our will on God instead of submitting to his. And it is a profoundly important reality to remember when we are treated wrongly, when we experience injustice, on account of our faith. Why? Because I quickly forget the greatest injustice in the world is not the way other people have treated me but the way I have treated God.

When I get that backwards, when our awareness of the injustice committed against us dwarfs our awareness of the injustice we have committed against God, two things happen. First, we lose the ability to repay evil with good, to respond to persecution with compassion, because we see ourselves as morally superior. We forget we need God's mercy just as much as our enemies. Second, we lose sight of the one thing that will comfort our fearful hearts when we experience injustice. What's that? The everlasting love of God demonstrated in laying down his life for us.

To remember the Savior who willingly allowed sinful men to bind and drive nails through the hands that created the universe is to be confronted with a divine condescension and love the world has never known. With a single word, he could have utterly vanquished his opponents, no less than he knocked them to the ground in v. 6. But he didn't. Why not? Because he loved us. Because he knew our

need for a perfect Savior to die the death we deserve to die. Listen to the words of J.C. Ryle:

“To suffer for those whom we love, and who are in some sense worthy of our affections, is suffering we can understand. To submit to ill-treatment quietly, when we have no power to resist, is submission that is both graceful and wise. But to suffer voluntarily, when we have the power to prevent it, and to suffer for a world of unbelieving and ungodly sinners, unasked and unthanked – this is a line of conduct which passes man’s understanding. Never let us forget that this is the peculiar beauty of Christ’s sufferings, when we read the wondrous story of His cross and passion.”

When the injustice committed against us dwarfs the injustice we have committed and inflicted upon God on account of our sin, we cut ourselves off from the one sight, the one vision of Christ, that assures our troubled hearts we are not alone or abandoned in our suffering. Our God walked through the valley of the shadow of death first. He did to make a way for us to always be with him. And he did it so all who follow him could do so knowing there is no tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, or sword that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

What did Caiaphas think? V. 14, “It would be expedient (*in a political, protect our own authority sense*) that one man should die for the people.” His unwitting prophecy was immeasurably truer than he realized. For it was more than expedient. It was more than a human calculation. It was the eternal plan of God for the salvation of mankind.

When we behold our suffering Savior, friend, what do we see? That our suffering for Jesus’ sake is never in vain. 1 Pe 4:12–14, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.” His story is your story, Christian, and yet we must never forget Jesus endured the greater injustice.

2) THE FEAR OF MAN IS A DEADLY TEMPTATION (vv. 15-18)

In v. 15, we learn Peter “followed Jesus” to the home of the high priest, which was a courageous thing to do considering he just cut off one of his servant’s ears! An unnamed disciple joined him, most likely the Apostle John, and the author of the fourth gospel. He apparently had a personal connection to the high priest’s household, which he leverages in v. 16 to bring Peter into the courtyard of the home.

On the way in, however, a servant girl watching the door says to Peter, “You also are not one of this man’s disciples, are you?” The very form of the question presumes the answer is no. Whether the “also” indicates she already knew John was one of Jesus’ followers is unclear. Regardless, she gives Peter his first opportunity to make a decision: Who will I fear? God or man? When a group of armed men queried Jesus about his identity back in v. 5, Jesus replied, “I am he.” Peter takes the exact opposite approach. V. 17, “I am not,” he says.

Friends, the fear of man is a powerful thing. Instead of deriving our identity, value, and security from God, we look to other people to construct it for us. Through the very nature of her question, the servant girl expresses an implicit desire that Peter not be one of Jesus’ followers and he was happy to oblige. He chose to be exactly what he sensed she wanted him to be. He took his cues for how he should think and act from a human being instead of taking them from God.

That’s what the fear of man always does. Because I crave the approval of man, I fear losing it, and thus I am willing to say, do, or be whatever they want me to be. And that’s the ultimate problem. People become our master, our functional god, instead of the Lord. We write God out of the universe by exchanging the glory of the Creator for the glory of the creature.

I’ll give you two examples, both from my own life. Those of you who have heard me speak in our parent-youth ministry, Frontline, have heard the first one before. When I attended my first live concert in the mid-90s, I showed up with a green t-shirt fully tucked into my khaki shorts. I can still picture the moment. As soon as I walked into the venue, I looked around, realized I was literally the only kid with his shirt tucked in, and immediately felt enormous pressure to fit in. So I subtly pulled my shirt out when I thought no one was watching.

Is it categorically “wrong” to untuck your shirt in the same way that it’s categorically wrong for Peter to deny his faith in Christ? Of course not. But the heart behind both actions is the same. Securing the man’s approval and avoiding man’s disapproval becomes our ruling desire. We don’t say with Paul in 1 Cor 4:3, “With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or any human court.” We say, “The most important thing, the matter of greatest weight, what is stubbornly occupying my mind in this moment is how I am being judged by someone other than God.”

What does the world say to a teenage kid like me? You need to grow in self-esteem. What does God say? You need to repent of your idolatry. You need to stop worshiping men and start worshiping me because that’s precisely what the fear of God is. It’s not a fear that trades anxiety for what people think of us for anxiety about what God thinks. No. It’s a reverential awe that causes us to move toward the Lord, to draw near to him, because we are confident in the steadfast love he has lavished on us through Jesus.

The temptation to fear man doesn’t go away when you get older. It just changes forms. Now I serve in a position of visible, public leadership. Guess what happens when you must make hard decisions that affect real people? You can’t please everyone. No matter what you do, someone will think you should have done something different. So, every day I have to decide – who am I going to fear? It’s an occupational hazard of pastoral ministry. Will I allow other people’s opinions, including people I deeply respect, to be the glory that fills my gaze? Or will I allow God’s glory, God’s evaluation, and most importantly God’s steadfast love for me to preoccupy my heart and mind? What’s it going to be, Matthew?

Have you ever had a conversation where you avoided saying anything about Jesus because you were afraid of offending someone? Have you ever changed the words you speak or text to make the world think you’re just like them? Maybe there was a time you spoke up about your faith and people either laughed or wrote you off as a quaint relic of days gone by. When you experience even subtle opposition on account of your faith, be on guard against the fear of man, my friend. It’s a spiritually deadly temptation because it leads us away from faithfulness to God.

3) OUR HIGH PRIEST IS FAITHFUL WHERE WE ARE NOT (vv. 19-24)

In v. 19, John cut away from Peter and back to Jesus. He’s experiencing immeasurably more opposition and persecution. V. 19, “The high priest then

questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching.” The whole “learn more” thing was a massive pretext. They already knew all they cared to know about Jesus. Ever since John chapter 5 where he called God his own Father, “making himself equal with God,” they wanted him dead. So, Jesus responds with a question about their real motives.

V. 21, “Why do you ask me?” I’m not another Jewish zealot secretly conspiring against Rome. I’m a public figure with a public ministry. There are countless witnesses from the synagogue or temple you could have interviewed if you really wanted to learn more. But you didn’t do that. You simply arrested me. Which proves this isn’t a fair trial. It’s a verdict in search of evidence.

Jesus isn’t taking his cues for what to say or not say from the people around him. He’s contending for the truth. And that didn’t go over very well. V. 22, “When he had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, ‘Is that how you answer the high priest?’”

It’s a question dripping with irony. Who’s the real high priest in the room? It’s not Annas. It’s not Caiaphas. It’s Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world by offering up his life for us. He makes a way for us to come home to God. And he did it willingly. His sacrifice was completely voluntary. He chose to die for us. He wasn’t forced to die by the will of men. Nor did he ever cower before their opinions and judgments.

He refused to allow the position or power of the person speaking to him to influence or change what he said. What mattered most to our Lord was not what Annas thought, or Annas wanted, or Annas said was true. What mattered most to him (and should matter most to us) is what God says is true. He walked in the fear of the Lord by speaking the truth. V. 23, ‘If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?’”

Jesus knew the truth is not determined by the office or group identity of the person speaking. Right and wrong are independent of human authority and power dynamics because they are grounded in the person of God. The biblical alternative to the fear of man, the alternative Jesus modeled in striking contrast to Peter, is not a dismissive arrogance that could care less what people think but rather a humble, sturdy confidence in the truth of God’s Word.

That's where the fear of man goes wrong. We allow ourselves to be intimidated by someone's position, power, or opinion instead of being ruled, in our thoughts, emotions, and actions, by the truth, by what God says is right or wrong, by what is consistent or inconsistent with the perfection of his character. Whenever we fall prey to the fear of man, we give mortal men a truth-determining authority that ultimately belongs to God, whether it's the truth about who I am, where my worth and value come from, or what I should think, feel, or do in each situation.

It's easy to stumble in this area, my friends. The exceedingly good news of the gospel is that the true high priest, Jesus, is faithful where we are not. For he's more than our example. He's our substitute. He's our representative. He's our righteousness. He fears God the Father on our behalf and does so perfectly so that all who cling to him by faith enjoy the same favor with the Father that he earned through his obedience. And when we are tempted to fear men instead of the One True God, he is able to help us in our weakness to turn away from sin and fear the Lord.

Heb 4:15-16, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." When persecution arises and we feel the sting of the world's opposition, remember: our high priest is faithful where we are not.

4) JESUS KNOWS WE ALL NEED A SAVIOR (vv. 25-27)

In v. 25, John cuts back to Peter as things quickly go from bad to worse. As Edward Klink observes, "At the same time the real high priest (Jesus) is not treated like one, the real witness (Peter) is not acting like one." This time a group of servants and officers, the same group that helped to arrest Jesus, looks at Peter in the firelight and says (v. 25), "You also are not one of his disciples, are you?" Again, he denies it. "I am not." But one of the servants isn't persuaded. V. 26, "A relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off" asks, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?" Again, Peter denies it.

Jesus affirms the truth as the faithful witness. Peter denies the truth as a false witness. Why? Because he is undoubtedly terrified by what they would do to him if they discovered who he was. And at that moment, a rooster crowed. Jesus saw it

coming all along. In 13:37-38, "Peter said to [Jesus], 'Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.' Jesus answered, 'Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.'"

Peter was convinced such a betrayal was beneath him. He thought of himself as spiritually strong, immune to the weaknesses and failings of lesser men. He was ready to rumble for the sake of King Jesus. It's the same self-confidence that prompted him to cut off the servant's ear in the garden. What did he fail to grasp? Just how much he needed a Savior. He needed to stop thinking and acting like he could save himself and start crying out to Jesus to save him.

The exceedingly good news of the gospel is that that's exactly what Jesus came to do, not just for Peter, but for all of us. Peter failed to lay down his life for the Lord, but Jesus did not fail to lay down his life for Peter, which is why at the end of John's gospel he graciously restores Peter to himself. So why does John highlight the man's greatest failure? He's not picking on Peter. He's making a profoundly important point: all of us need a Savior. There are no exceptions. It's not just the "bad people" out there who need Jesus. It's those of us who are seeking to follow him.

Like Peter, we need to grasp and not forget the reality of our sinful nature, the depth of our spiritual weakness. We're shocked when public, Christian leaders stumble and fall, or when a fellow believer does something that seems completely contradictory to their profession. How could they possibly do that? Jesus isn't surprised and nor should we be, brothers and sisters. None of us are immune to temptation, fear of man included. People inside the church need the grace and mercy of the gospel just as much as people on the outside.

1 Cor 10:12-14, "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall." There is only one who is perfectly faithful and it's not you or me. It's Jesus. It's not your spouse or your kids or your favorite pastor. It's Jesus. Great weakness resides in even real Christians. Peter needed a Savior and so do you. So do I. Remembering as much is the key to living in humility before God and man and having biblical expectations of our brothers and sisters in the church.

So when the next scandal comes out, when the next person you know tries to trade the momentary suffering of an exile for the fleeting pleasure of sin, don't gobble up

the gossip with greedy self-righteousness. Remember the gospel. Remember what Jesus knows and sees. He knew Peter would fear man more than God that night.

He knows how you've stumbled. He knows how you'll stumble in the future. Our weaknesses and failures may be hidden from the eyes of men, our own gaze included. But they are intimately known by God and decisively dealt with at the cross of Jesus Christ. For on that night, when Peter responded to the enmity of the world with alternating rage and fear, Jesus calmly stepped forward to do what only he could do.

Col 2:13-14, "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross." Jesus isn't surprised we need a Savior. We shouldn't be surprised either. In his perfect faithfulness, he has done all that is necessary to redeem our unfaithfulness and restore us to himself through his life, death, and resurrection.

CONCLUSION

Persecution is bound to come. If you haven't already experienced it, Christian, trust me, you will. In this world we will have trouble. It's always painful. But it need not be disorienting. John 18 prepares us. Remember Jesus endured the greater injustice. Remember the fear of man is a deadly temptation. Remember our high priest is faithful where we are not. And remember Jesus isn't surprised you need a Savior.

He will be faithful to rescue you. He will be faithful to forgive you. He will be faithful to restore you. Don't fear man. Don't make the thoughts and opinions of other people the gravitational center of your life. Fear the Lord. Speak and act according to the truth.

And when you inevitably stumble and fall, keep looking to Jesus, "the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted" (Heb 12:2-3). Apart from him, we have no hope. In him, we have all we need.