

Faithful Unto Death (Acts 7:51-60)^a

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Context

1. Stephen testifies before the religious leaders of Israel
2. Accused of blasphemy, a serious crime in Israel, punishable by death
3. Reviews Israel's history which illustrates a pattern: opposing and rejecting individuals chosen by God — the crucifixion of Jesus being the ultimate example.

Acts 7:51-60

1. ***"[51] You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. [52] Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, [53] who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it." [54] When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. [55] But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, [56] and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" [57] Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; [58] and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. [59] And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." [60] Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep."***¹
2. Stephen, the first of many Church-Age martyrs to follow.

Jesus said it would come

1. Luke **21:10-19** - ***[10] Then He [Jesus] said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. [11] And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences; and there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven. [12] But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons. You will be brought before kings and rulers for My name's sake. [13] But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony. [14] Therefore settle it***

in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer; [15] for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist. [16] You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. [17] And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. [18] But not a hair of your head shall be lost. [19] By your patience possess your souls.

- A. Before the time of the end - during the entire church age - expect persecution!
- B. Occasion for testimony (**ἀποβήσεται ὑμῖν εἰς μαρτύριον** [*apobēsetai hymin eis martyrion*] = it will lead into testimony)
- C. Jesus promises to provide the needed words when the occasion arises
- D. Some will die (yet this will be entirely within the will of God)
- E. A promise of ultimate preservation: not a hair of your head shall be lost
- F. By your patience (**ὑπομονῇ**, [*hypomonē*] = abide under) possess your souls!
 - I. Patience will be needed! For what? To endure prison, torture, even death.
- G. Hold finger here - will be returning to these principles

Why Martyrdom?

1. How can it be within God's permissive will that some believers undergo martyrdom?
2. A *verbal* testimony: confessing the message of God in the face of its fiercest rejectors
3. A *physical* testimony: the ultimate demonstration of victory over the fear of death and even death itself
 - A. Victory over death itself
 - I. Remember the words of Jesus in Luke **21:10-19** - . . . [16] . . . **they will put some of you to death. . . . [18] But not a hair of your head shall be lost. [19] By your patience possess your souls.**
 - a. Patience - to walk through the very gates of death if need be,

trusting in our guaranteed preservation at the hands of God no matter what man may do to us.

- II. The words of Jesus to the Church at Smyrna in the book of Revelation, Rev. **2:10** - *Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.*
- III. 1Cor. **15:51-55** - *Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed— [52] in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. [53] For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. [54] So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory. [55] O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?"*
- IV. Rom. **8:35-39** - *[35] Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? [36] As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." [37] Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. [38] For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, [39] nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

B. Therefore: victory over the fear of death in this life now!

- I. Heb. **2:14-15** - *[14] Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself [Jesus] likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil,; [15] and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.*
- II. Rev. **12:10-11** - *[10] Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, "Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down. [11] And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death."*

4. A witness so very powerful that even the persecutors are unable to resist—as it works upon their souls

A. Paul

- I. Acts **7:58** - . . . *And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.*
- II. Acts **22:20** - *And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.*

B. Auca Indians of Ecuador: as recorded in the book, "Through Gates of Splendor"²

- I. Five missionaries murdered: Jim Elliot, Ed McCully, Nate Saint, Pete Fleming, Roger Youderian
- II. All six of the men who murdered the missionary party found faith and forgiveness in Christ.
 - a. One (Kimo) became a pastor among the Auca Indians
 - b. Years later, he baptized the son and daughter of one of the murdered missionaries (Nate Saint) at the same river site where the murders had occurred.
- III. One of the converted Auca murderers himself became a martyr taking the gospel to an enemy clan downstream.
- IV. Converted Auca Indians have testified at evangelism conferences and missionary rallies

5. Fill up the measure of judgment for rejectors

- A. Rev. **6:9-11** - *When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. [10] And they cried with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" [11] Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.*

B. Filling a cup - the whore of Revelation

- I. Rev. **17:5-6** - *[5] And on her forehead a name was written: MYSTERY,*

BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. [6] I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. And when I saw her, I marveled with great amazement.

- II. Rev. **18:24** - *And in her was found the blood of prophets and saints, and of all who were slain on the earth.*
- III. Rev. **19:2** - *For true and righteous are His judgments, because He has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication; and He has avenged on her the blood of His servants shed by her.*

6. Glorifies God

- A. John **21:18-19** - *[18] "Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish." [19] This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me."*
- B. A demonstration of the power of God because the powers of darkness are unable to overcome the faith of the elect
 - I. Rev. **20:4** - *And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.*

Spiritual dimension

- 1. Rom. **8:35-39** - . . . [38] *For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, . . . [39] . . . shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*
- 2. Jesus, to the church in Pergamos, Rev. **2:13** - *I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, here Satan dwells.*
- 3. Boxer pagan practices

The Righteous Ones, as the Boxers were called, bitterly opposed Christianity, which they termed "the religion of the foreign devils." In a desperate effort to

preserve the old pagan religions, they had established a network of secret cells across China. Initiates repeated a sacred formula until they fell foaming at the mouth, then joined in a black magic ritual that sometimes included human sacrifices to temple idols. The Boxers claimed they were commanded by "heavenly deities," and were thus invulnerable.³

4. Cruelty

A. The introduction to one particularly graphic book on the history of Christian persecution states,

One often hears that certain Tortures were inflicted on the first Christians, but, beyond a few vague hints scattered here and there, it is impossible for unlettered folk to imagine the nature of the sufferings they were made to endure. A perusal of the following pages will prove sufficiently edifying. Probably no more awful lesson of Man's inhumanity to man, concentrated in so short a space, can be found throughout the annals of literature.⁴

B. Devices of cruelty mentioned within the text include: crucifixion, stakes, the wheel, the pulley, the press, the wooden horse, scourging, iron claws, hooks, currycombs, red-hot plates, torches, blazing brands, brazen bull, frying-pan, pot, cauldron, gridiron, bedstead, chair, helmet, tunic, nails, saws, spears, swords, arrows, tearing out the inwards, cutting the throat, beheading, branding, pounding with axes and clubs, amputating women's bosoms, cutting out the tongue, lopping off hands and feet, pulling out the teeth, flaying alive, exposing to wild beasts, burying alive, throwing into rivers, wells, or lime kilns.

C. In the forward of recent book on modern Christian martyrs, the late Chuck Colson writes,

The examples [of brutal persecution] are heartbreakingly plentiful. The list of afflictions reads like an alphabet of cruelty: amputation, bombing, crucifixion, displacement, flogging, kidnapping, murder, prison, rape, slavery, and torture.⁵

D. John Lambert, a fellow of Queen's College, Cambridge martyred at the infamous **Smithfield^c**, England (1538)

Of all those burned at Smithfield, none were so cruelly and mercilessly handled as this blessed martyr. After his legs had burned to stumps, his tormentors [withdrew] most of the fire from him so that only a small fire burned beneath him, and then two of them stood on each side and impaled his upper body with the pikes on their halberds and held him up so that he could not fall into the fire. Lambert hung helplessly that way as many of the people groaned and cried with pity. Then the fat in his finger tips caught fire and he lifted up his hands toward heaven and cried to the people, "None but Christ, none but Christ." At that, his tormentors let him

down again from their halberds, and he fell forward into the fire and there gave up his life for Christ.⁶

E. Isle of Guernsey, in the English Channel (1556)

. . . three women were burnt in the island of Guernsey, under circumstances of aggravated cruelty, whose names were, Catherine Cauches, and her two daughters, Mrs. Perotine Massey, and Guillemine Gilbert. The day of execution having arrived, three stakes were erected: the middle post was assigned to the mother, the eldest daughter on her right hand, and the younger on the left. They were strangled previous to burning, but the rope breaking before they were dead, the poor women fell into the fire. Perotine, at the time of her inhuman sentence, was largely pregnant, and now, falling on her side upon the flaming fagots, presented a singular spectacle of horror!—Torn open by the tremendous pangs she endured, she was delivered of a fine male child, who was rescued from its burning bed by the humanity of one W. House, who tenderly laid it on the grass. The infant was taken to the provost, and by him presented to the bailiff, when the inhuman monster decreed it to be re-cast into the fire, that it might perish with its heretical mother! Thus was this innocent baptised in its own blood, to make up the very climax of Romish barbarity; being born and dying at the same time a martyr; and realizing again the days of Herodian cruelty, with circumstances of bigoted malice unknown even to that execrable murderer.⁷

- F. **Can such cruelty originate by human depravity alone? Or are these examples produced by human depravity, amplified and directed by demonic influences of incredible darkness? The *angels . . . principalities [and] powers* of which Paul wrote in Romans 8:38?**

Enablement of the Holy Spirit

1. Stephen's remarkable testimony

A. Eloquence and effectiveness

- I. **Luke 21:10-19** - Jesus said, . . . **[14] Therefore settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer; [15] for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist. . . .**

B. Boldness

- I. **Acts 7:51-53** - **[51] "You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. [52] Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you**

now have become the betrayers and murderers, [53] who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it."

C. Composure under duress

- I. **Acts 6:15 - *And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.***
- II. : ***[55] . . . he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, [56] and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" . . . [59] And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." [60] Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.***

D. Love of enemies

- I. ***[60] Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.***
 - a. **Similar to the words of Jesus on the cross: *Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." . . . (Luke 23:34).***
 - b. **Superhuman forgiveness - these words can only come from the indwelling Holy Spirit**

2. The composure of other witnesses under duress

A. Thomas Hauker - England, 1555

For believing the Gospel of Christ and the truth of the Scriptures, Thomas Hauker was condemned to be burned to death. As he was being led to his place of burning, many of the faithful in the crowd that followed asked him to somehow give them a sign if the grace of God was sufficient in the fire. His persecutors tied him to the stake, piled faggots around him, and set them on fire. For a while Hauker prayed aloud, but the violence of the flames soon took away his voice, and he stood silent in the flames, unmoving, even as his flesh turned black and his fingers burst into fire. He stood that way for so long that most thought he was dead. Then suddenly and unexpectedly, this blessed servant of God stretched his arms up over his head toward the living God, his hands flaming like torches, and, with an act of rejoicing that all could sense, struck his hands together three times—as if for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then his hands fell to his sides and he slumped forward into the flames. [Goggeshall, 1555]⁸

B. Father Jean de Brebeuf, missionary to the Indians, America, 1649

Brebeuf's martyrdom came in 1649 when he was captured by a band of Iroquois. It says something of the stature he had gained among the Native Americans that when he was finally killed, after excruciating torture, the Iroquois cut out his heart and ate it so that they might receive a share of his courage.⁹

C. The Boxer Rebellion of China, 1900

At remote Tsun-hua [China] the Chinese Methodist pastor was forced into a pagan temple, mocked before idols, then left tied to a pillar. He spent the night preaching while friends pleaded with him to recant. In the morning a thousandstrong mob descended on him and literally tore out his heart. Two Chinese women teachers who were captured, also refused to renounce Christianity. The feet of one were chopped off and she was then killed with a sword. The other—shouting to her pupils, "Keep the faith!"—was wrapped in cotton, soaked with kerosene, and burned alive. One hundred sixty-three Chinese Methodists in Tsun-hua were martyrs for Christ in June 1900.¹⁰

Christian martyrdom in modern times

1. Recently

- A. **"ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — A mob accused of burning alive a Christian couple in an industrial kiln in Pakistan allegedly wrapped a pregnant mother in cotton so she would catch fire more easily, according to family members who witnessed the attack. Sajjad Maseeh, 27, and his wife Shama Bibi, 24, were set upon by at least 1,200 people after rumors circulated that they had burned verses from the Quran, family spokesman Javed Maseeh told NBC News via telephone late Thursday. Their legs were also broken so they couldn't run away. "They picked them up by their arms and legs and held them over the brick furnace until their clothes caught fire," he said. "And then they threw them inside the furnace." Bibi, a mother of four who was four months pregnant, was wearing an outfit that initially didn't burn, according to Javed Maseeh. The mob removed her from over the kiln and wrapped her up in cotton to make sure the garments would be set alight."**¹¹

2. Statistics about martyrdoms in this age?

- A. **Accurate numbers are difficult to come by due to the nature of the incidents**

According to a study done at Regent University, there were close to 164,000 Christians martyred around the world in 1999. An estimated

165,000 will be martyred in 2000.¹²

According to the *1997 World Christian Encyclopedia*, between 155,000 and 159,000 Christians are killed for their faith throughout the world every year.¹³

During the height of communism worldwide, an average of 330,000 Christians were killed each year.¹⁴

More Christians were martyred in this century alone than in all the past centuries combined.¹⁵

3. Primary ideologies: communism and militant Islam¹⁷

A. “Communist persecution: China, North Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, Laos”¹⁸

B. “Muslim persecution: Pakistan, Indonesia, Nigeria, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Uzbekistan”¹⁹

4. “According to The Pew Research Center, over 75% of the world's population live in areas with severe religious restrictions. Many of these people are Christians. Also, according to the United States Department of State, Christians in more than 60 countries face persecution from their governments or surrounding neighbors simply because of their belief in the person of Jesus Christ. . . . Christians today are the most persecuted religious group in the world.”²⁰
5. Countries in which Christians endure harsh persecutions in modern times include: Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, China, Comoro Islands, Cuba, Cyprus, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Laos, Libya, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritania, Morocco, Myanmar (Burma), Nigeria, North Korea, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Tibet, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Yemen.²¹
6. One book documenting modern Christian martyrdom tells its story in ten regions: “Martyrs of China . . . Martyrs of Japan and Korea . . . Martyrs of Southeast Asia . . . Martyrs of South and Central Asia . . . Martyrs of the Asian Pacific Islands . . . Martyrs of Nazi Germany and Occupied Europe . . . Martyrs of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe . . . Martyrs of the Middle East . . . Martyrs of Sub-Saharan Africa . . . Martyrs of the Caribbean and Latin America”²²
- A. Notice that western Europe and North America are presently missing, but that could soon change if modern trends continue. If unchecked, the growing influence of humanist atheism and radical Islam will see to it.

Take-aways concerning Christian persecution and martyrdom

1. Jesus predicted it

A. John **15:18-20** [18] *If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. [19] If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. [20] Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. . . .*

2. It is within God's purpose to allow some of His sheep to be led to the slaughter, thereby producing the most powerful testimony possible of allegiance to the truth of God and the reality of eternal life beyond the grave.

3. If and when we face extreme persecution:

A. **We must remember that our oppressors are themselves captive to powerful spiritual forces**

B. **We must trust in the promise of Jesus that He will provide the words as needed**

C. **We can expect divine perspective in the midst of the storm**

4. **If we happen to live in a time and place where paying the ultimate price to serve Christ is unlikely:**

A. **Remember that "Martyrdom is more than being killed for Christ. It's living for Christ every moment of every day in the midst of persecution and life-threatening opposition. It's enduring great loss and suffering, yet praising God for all things. It's forgiving your persecutors and praying for their salvation. It's working to fulfill the Great Commission regardless of the inconveniences and dangers it imposes."²³**

B. **Intercede for the cause of brothers and sisters in other parts of the world who are daily paying a very high price for freedoms which all too often take for granted**

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Endnotes:

1. [Acts 7:51-60](#), Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture references are from the *New King James Version*, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
2. [Ref-1374](#), 614-622
3. [Ref-1374](#), 17
4. [Ref-1269](#), i
5. [Ref-1377](#), ix
6. [Ref-1375](#), 249
7. [ef-1306](#), para. 4958
8. [Ref-1375](#), xx
9. [Ref-0958](#), 20
10. [Ref-1374](#), 15-16
11. <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/pakistani-christians-burned-alive-were-attacked-1-200-people-kin-n243386>
12. [Ref-1376](#), -
13. [Ref-1375](#), 326
14. [Ref-1375](#), 326
15. [Ref-1375](#), 323
16. [Ref-1377](#), 1
17. “[The centers of Christian oppression and martyrdom] evidence a worldwide trend of anti-Christian persecution based on two political ideologies—communism and militant Islam.”¹⁶
18. [Ref-1377](#), vii
19. [Ref-1377](#), vii
20. <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/persecution/about-persecution>^e
21. [Ref-1376](#), 316-357
22. [Ref-1374](#), 5-7
23. [Ref-1375](#), 395

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- Ref-0958** Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992). ISBN:[0-8028-0651-1](#)^f.
- Ref-1269** Antonio Gallonio, *Torture: Torments of the Christian Martyrs* (New York, NY: Walden Publications, 1939).
- Ref-** James Hefley, Marti Hefley, *By Their Blood: Christian Martyrs of the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books,

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Ref-1376 dc Talk, Voice of the Martyrs, *Jesus Freaks* (Tulsa, OK: Albury Publishing, 1999). ISBN:1-57778-072-8ⁱ.

Ref-1377 Nina Shea, *In the Lion's Den* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1997). ISBN:0-8054-6357-7^j.

Links Mentioned Above

a - See http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/23_Acts_7_51-60/index.htm.

b - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.

c - See <http://www.protestant-alliance.org/page29.html>.

d - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.

e - See <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/persecution/about-persecution>.

f - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/isbn.htm?0-8028-0651-1>.

g - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/isbn.htm?0-8010-4395-6>.

h - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/isbn.htm?0-88270-672-1>.

i - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/isbn.htm?1-57778-072-8>.

j - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/isbn.htm?0-8054-6357-7>.