

“A BOLD WITNESS FOR CHRIST”
Romans 1:14-17, I John 2:24-29, Acts 4:1-22
June 1 & 2, 2024

“She was 17 years old. He stood glaring at her, his weapon before her face.

“Do you believe in God?”

“Cassie Bernall paused. It was a life-or-death question. ‘Yes, I believe in God.’

“Why?” asked her executioner. But he never gave her the chance to respond.

“The teenage girl lay dead at his feet.

“This scene could have happened in the Roman coliseum. It could have happened in the Middle Ages. And it could have happened in any number of countries around the world today. People are being imprisoned, tortured, and killed every day because they refuse to deny the name of Jesus.

“This particular account, though, did not happen in ancient times, nor in Vietnam, Pakistan, or Romania. It happened at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, on April 20, 1999.”¹ This young Christian woman would not deny her new faith in Jesus. As a result, she died for her faith.

But let me ask you some important questions. When faced by opposition and threatening people, how do we stand up to their questions about faith in Jesus Christ? Are we strong enough in our faith to boldly stand up and testify that we are followers of Jesus? Or do we cave into the pressure and deny being one of His disciples? Are we willing to face persecution and even death because we stand strong in our belief that Jesus Christ is our Savior and Lord? Or do we blend in with all of the rest around us and hide our faith and keep from letting anyone know about our faith? Are we ready to share God’s Word with those around us who need to hear about Jesus being our Messiah? Or do we live and speak and act like everyone else around us, thereby denying that Jesus is an important part of our life?

These are probing questions we need to ask ourselves, especially as the days are growing discouraging and dangerous for those who trust Jesus as their Savior. We need to ask ourselves the question, “Is Jesus that important to me that I would live, and possibly die, for Him, no matter what?”

¹ (D.C. Talk & Voice of the Martyrs, *Jesus Freaks*, [Tulsa, OK: Albury Publishing, 1999] pg. 17)

Our Scripture lessons today invite us to diligently and desperately hang on tightly to our faith in Jesus Christ so that we might be His bold witnesses in a world that is growing more and more cold to the truth of Jesus being our Messiah and Savior. In our culture here in the United States, greater and greater pressure is being put on people of faith to give up their belief in Christ Jesus and to just conform with society around us. We're being taunted, and belittled, and persecuted, and ordered to accept the beliefs of society as being true and right, and to let the teaching of the Bible go. In fact, we're being told that the teachings of the Bible just don't fit with our society today, that they aren't helpful for anyone, and that those who trust in those teachings are backwards, archaic, and "old school." We're being told that the teachings of the Bible are racist, or bigoted, or chauvinistic, or even discriminatory. If we are a faithful, Bible-believing, Christ following Christian, we're counted as atrocities to the human race, despicable, and worthy of persecution and extermination. You've all heard it!

And there are some people who are taking the teachings of the Bible and are twisting them to fit whatever lifestyle they want to live. They're putting new interpretations on the lessons in the Bible to match whatever goal they want to achieve. These manipulations of Scripture to fulfill their own purposes and desires are leading so many people away from the Way, the Truth and the Life that is ONLY found in Jesus Christ. So it is even more imperative for us who still believe in the Bible as God's truth, lifting Jesus Christ up as the Only One Who Can Save Us, to become vocal ambassadors for Jesus wherever we go.

This same thing happened to the disciples of Jesus soon after the Holy Spirit came into them on Pentecost. The Holy Spirit gave the followers of Jesus the courage to stand up for what is good and right according to the Scriptures, no matter who they encountered.

Peter and John found themselves in precisely the same situation, only they faced their own priests and Sadducees. As you remember from last week's account, Peter and John had healed a lame beggar at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple in the Name of Jesus Christ. The man went into the Temple with them, leaping, and dancing and praising God, and everyone recognized him as the one who sat at

the gate begging. Having caused such a commotion in the Temple, Peter had addressed those who ran to them, and told them how the man was healed and who Jesus was.

But the Sadducees and priests had them arrested. Listen to the account. This is Acts 4:1-22.

(READ Acts 4:1-22)

The leaders of the Temple were so incensed about the disciples preaching about Jesus and telling the people there of His resurrection from the dead, that they arrested them and put them into jail until they could gather the next day to interrogate them. Their question was, “*By what power or what name did you do this?*” (Acts 4:7).

Now these were the leaders of the Temple that Peter and John and the beggar were standing in front of. They had the power to do a great many things to those they wanted to. All three of them could have been thrown out of the Temple. They’d already been arrested and jailed. These were powerful men they stood in front of. What would they do?

Well, empowered by the Holy Spirit, Peter gives the rulers and elders of the people a quick sermon of remembrance, telling them what they had done to Jesus Christ, how God had raised Him from the dead, and how in the power of His Name, the beggar had been healed of his 40+ year palsy. He went on to inform them that it is this man, Jesus Christ, who gives complete forgiveness of our sins and makes us right before God. He says, “*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved*” (4:12).

Amazing! To speak to the Temple leaders with such confidence and power! WOW!

But it is interesting that “*when they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus*” (4:13). THERE! It was the recognition that these men were followers of Jesus that caught their attention, and that they were simple men - fishermen. They did not shrink at the presence or the badgering of the Temple leaders. They quoted Scripture, proving the reality of Jesus being the Messiah just as the prophets had foretold. These simple men stood face to face with those in positions of power,

and they preached the Scriptures to them, hoping to get their attention that it is Jesus Christ who is Savior and Lord, AND it was in His Name that the beggar was healed. NO OTHER NAME HAS THAT SAME POWER! The disciples were bold witnesses to what they had seen and heard, and they wanted everyone to know about it, regardless of the consequences put to them.

Sadly their words landed upon deaf ears and hard hearts, so the only thing the leaders could do was to order them NOT “*to speak...to anyone in this name*” (4:17). Their hearts were so hard that they could not put 2 and 2 together to make 4. They refused to even consider that what the disciples said was true. They didn’t bother to check out the Scriptures to proof-text their use of God’s Word. All they could do was to “*command them to stop speaking or teaching at all in the name of Jesus*” (4:18).

But the boldness of the disciples was great, and they responded, “*Which is right in God’s eyes; to listen to you, or to Him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard*” (4:19-20).

Can you imagine saying anything like that to a judge? Or to a police officer? Or to a mayor? Or to a bishop? Or to a senate? Or to a president? But folks, that’s the kind of boldness that Jesus invites us to have, as we trust in Him and obey His command to tell the whole world about Him.

After His conversion to Christianity, the Apostle Paul told the Christians in Rome, “*I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes; first to the Jew, then to the Gentile*” (Romans 1:14-16). He was so convinced that Jesus is the Only Way for us to come back to the Lord our God that he dedicated his life after his conversion to telling others about the need for Jesus to be their Savior. Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, all are in need of hearing the Good News of God’s Salvation through Jesus Christ. He was not afraid to tell others about Jesus, even if his life was threatened, he was imprisoned, or if he faced raging mobs. Everyone needed to know about Jesus, so he was willing to do all he could do to help them come to understand that Jesus is God’s Messiah for us.

Zahid was the same way. Much like Paul, Zahid started out as a persecutor of the church, but soon grew to become an ambassador for Jesus Christ. Listen to his story...

“When you catch the infidels, beat them! Allah will be pleased,” Zahid encouraged them. The crowd of young men, the youth group of his mosque, waved their sticks and iron bars and cheered in agreement. Zahid’s arrogance and hatred swelled. He felt he was doing well as a young Muslim priest. His parents would be proud. He had rallied a rather large group for this outing and they were nearly ready to go. Within minutes they would be combing the streets of their village for Christians to ambush.

“Zahid had a proud heritage in Pakistan. His father and older brother were Muslim priests. As expected, Zahid had followed in their footsteps. Shortly after he was assigned to his first mosque, his hatred for Christians began to show itself as he rallied his followers against them.

“To Zahid, as to many Muslims, Christians are heretics and should be punished. His government was becoming more influenced by *Sharia* (Islamic law) in some provinces. *Sharia* law calls for the death of anyone found guilty of blasphemy against the prophet Mohammed or the Koran. To these Muslims, rejecting Mohammed’s teachings by becoming a Christian is the highest form of blasphemy.

“When their fervor peaked, Zahid led his group into the streets. It was not long before they found a group of young Christians to attack. As the mob descended upon them, the young boys ran, one of them dropping his Bible. One of Zahid’s group stopped, picked up the Bible, and opened it to rip out its pages. Zahid had always told his followers to burn all the Bibles they collected, but this time Zahid felt strangely compelled to keep it and study it in order to expose its errors to the people of his mosque. He quickly snatched the book from the man, encouraged him to chase the fleeing Christians, and tucked the Bible into his shirt for later.

“Zahid reported in his own words what became of keeping that Bible:

“I was reading the Bible, looking for contradictions I could use against the Christian faith. All of a sudden, a great light appeared in my room and I heard a voice call my name. The light was so bright, it lit the entire room.

“Then the voice asked, ‘Zahid, why do you persecute Me?’

“I was scared. I didn’t know what to do. I thought I was dreaming. I asked, ‘Who are you?’”

“I heard, ‘I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.’

“For the next three nights the light and the voice returned. Finally, on the fourth night, I knelt down and I accepted Jesus as my Savior.’

“Zahid’s hatred was suddenly gone. All he wanted to do was share Jesus with everyone he knew. He went to his family members and those in the mosque and told them what had happened to him over the last four nights, but they didn’t believe him. His family and friends turned against him. They called the authorities to have him arrested so he would leave them alone about this Jesus. According to Islamic teaching, Zahid was now considered an apostate, a traitor to Islam, a man who had turned from his faith and accepted stupid lies. Thus, he was a criminal.

“Zahid was locked up in prison for two years. The guards repeatedly beat and tortured him. One time, they pulled out his fingernails in an attempt to break his faith. Another time, they tied him to the ceiling fan by his hair and left him to hang there.

“Although I suffered greatly at the hands of my Muslim captors, I held no bitterness towards them. I knew that just a few years before, I had been one of them. I too had hated Christians.’

“During my trial, I was found guilty of blasphemy. According to the Sharia law, I was to be executed by hanging. They tried to force me to recant my faith in Jesus. They assured me that if I cooperated there would be no more beatings, no more humiliation. I could go free.’

“But I could not deny Jesus. Mohammed had never visited me; Jesus had. I knew He was the Truth. I just prayed for the guards, hoping that they would also come to know Jesus.’

“On the day Zahid was to be hanged, he was unafraid of death as they came to take him from his cell. Even as they took him to his execution and placed the noose around his neck, Zahid preached about Jesus to his guards and executioners. He wanted his last breaths on earth to be used in telling his countrymen that Jesus was ‘the Way, the Truth, and the Life.’ Zahid stood ready to face his Savior.

“Suddenly, loud voices were heard in the outer room. Guards hurried in to tell Zahid’s executioners that the court had unexpectedly issued an order to release Zahid, stating that there was not enough evidence to execute him. To this day, no one knows why Zahid was suddenly allowed to go free.

“Zahid later changed his name to Lazarus, feeling that he too had been raised from death. He traveled in the villages around his home testifying of his narrow escape from death. Many of the Christians did not trust him at first. But soon they saw his sincerity and received him into their family. They now assist him as he travels from village to village preaching Jesus as ‘the Way, the Truth, and the Life.’

“Zahid says, ‘I live in a land ruled by the false teaching of Islam. My people are blinded, and I was chosen by God to be His voice. I count all that I have suffered nothing compared to the endless joy of knowing Jesus, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.’”²

God changes our lives as we learn about Jesus, read His Word, and then accept Jesus as our Savior and Lord. Our faith is not just for our own salvation, but to be used by God to tell everyone around us about the Salvation that comes through Jesus Christ. He is the One who brings life to all who will believe!

Take a moment to look around you today, right here in this place. See the ones who are your brothers and sisters in Christ! They are here to support and encourage you to live your faith boldly before all those around you so that you might tell them about Jesus. We’re just like the disciples of Jesus before He ascended - shy, meek, unschooled and ordinary people. But take a moment now to think of those that you come across during your day who do not know Jesus. Who’s going to tell them about the Way, the Truth and the Life? Who’s going to help them to develop a relationship with Jesus so that they might receive eternal life, too? Are you willing to just let them go on living the way that they want to and then die in their sins with no hope of forgiveness or reconciliation to the Lord God?

² (D.C. Talk & Voice of the Martyrs, *Jesus Freaks*, [Tulsa, OK: Albury Publishing, 1999] pg. 52-55)

Or are you willing, like Zahid, to become so excited about Jesus being your Savior and Lord that you can't wait to tell everyone around you what He's done in your life to save you? Are you willing to give your last breath telling even those who persecute you and kill you that you are a believer in Jesus, and to preach to them of Jesus' love for all of us so that they might come to know Jesus, too?

That's what God is inviting us to do. It's what Jesus commanded all of His disciples to do. It's what Jesus calls each one of us to do today. It's more important than the Brewers winning over the Cubs! It's more important than the scandals that are happening throughout our nation and world. It's more important than any movie or TV show. It's more important than anything else that we have to talk about today. **BUT IT'S THE LEAST TALKED ABOUT TODAY BECAUSE WE'RE AFRAID OF OFFENDING SOMEONE!** Oh, God, that we would have more faith!

Folks, I pray that you and I would become as bold as Peter and John and Paul and all of the other disciples of Jesus, that we witness our own faith in Jesus to those around us so that they might hear and comprehend the great love of God for all of us. I pray that you fall in love with Jesus so much that you can't help but tell everyone of all that Jesus has done in and through you. I pray that this church would become the resident of the Holy Spirit, empowering each one of us to let Jesus be the very 1ST in our hearts so that He is the first one who comes to mind as we live among and speak to those around us.

Let's pray. Oh, Holy Spirit, come into this place and fill us with the courage and motivation and joy of Jesus to become a bold witness for Him in our world today! Fill our hearts with Your love for others so that we see in them brothers and sisters, and that we long to help them find Jesus as their Savior, too. Oh, God, we need You to visit each one of us so that we are absolutely convinced that You are our Lord. Fill our hearts with Your love, so that no matter who we encounter, we boldly stand up for Jesus. Give us the courage to NEVER DENY our faith in Him, that we are willing to face anyone and anything boldly to pronounce Jesus as our Savior and Lord. Come into this place, even now, Lord, and make us new creatures in Christ Jesus, so that we might freely and boldly live for Him every day of our lives. This we pray in Jesus' Name! And all God's people said, "AMEN!" And Amen.