

a dying way to live

Is your life 'heaven on earth'?

“Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.” (Rev 2:10) What a strange and glorious command! ‘Die – and enjoy the life of a winner!’ Only the One who is “the first and the last, who died and came to life” (Rev 2:8) could so command and deliver on such a promise. It’s not improbable that the letter to Smyrna answered a prayer of the church’s elders...

...“Master, it seems like the whole world hates us. We have been barred from the synagogue as traitors and heretics. Even friends have become enemies – afraid to be associated with us who refuse to worship the emperor. We give Rome its dues, like everyone else, but worship belongs only to You – it is not ours to give. What would you have us do, Lord?” As they weighed their choices – and the lead they owed to God’s flock in their care, their humble hearts waited for Him to speak – never imagining that He would use the postman...

These lovely saints were, without realising it, already walking the Calvary Road. Destitute in worldly terms, they were wealthy with riches the world could not supply and could not buy. Slandered by self-deceived fellow Jews who imagined that they were serving God, they felt Satan’s crushing hatred of their light in his darkness. How amazing to get a letter from the Master who says: “I KNOW”! As an olive must have its heart crushed to give its finest oil, these saints had reached their Gethsemane – but not before the Pioneer... HE KNEW...

Jars to flasks...

They had begun their walk at Calvary – where a truly Christian walk always begins. His selfless death – and the Spirit’s indwelling – had inspired and empowered their daily dying: to their right to themselves, to sin’s deceptions, to the pull of the crowd, to the idolatry of the empire... His Potter’s hands had re-made their jars of clay. They had become beautiful flasks, filled with the fragrance of His Presence. It was time to break open their precious lives; to release the aroma of His indestructible life into sin’s far country. Their fragrant suffering and death for His Name’s sake would evoke memories of home and Father for many prodigals. “Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life”. He knew ahead of time how they would choose, what lead they would give. They would love their Saviour, not their own lives, unto death. (Rev 12:11)

The blood of the martyrs is still flowing, still seeding the Church in our day. Are we ready to die? Are we ready to live? Will we mount the winners’ podium? Will we reign with Him? We are not all called to martyrdom – but we are all called to die. (Gal 2:20)

Jesus loved His church in Smyrna. He loved all His churches, but at that moment Smyrna was ready – heaven ready – to run into the flames of a burning world and rescue... the mad arsonists! Martyrs are God’s first responders. Their hearts are big with His mercy, and they are friends to their foes. In those days, torture was a spectator sport. People paid good money for the best seats to watch the tormentors at work – ‘work’ that ceased only when what remained of their victim – alive or dead – would feed the wild animals. The only other currency required for attendance at the blood-fest was insanity. Well, of course, you would either be mad when you arrived or by the time you left. But among those baying for the blood of the Christians would be some who, like **Saul of Tarsus**, would receive heaven’s mercy. The calm, forgiving composure of those who loved Jesus unto death and

forgave their enemies would melt an ice-cold heart here and there as dying victims snatched some of their persecutors from the mad inferno. No determined rebel is ever safe from the kindness of God.

This ‘all for Jesus’ Christianity is – tragically – a foreign country to most believers in our culture where we too often say “No” and “Lord” in the same breath. Centuries of establishment respectability and comfort have programmed us against any expectation of “hardship as soldiers of Christ”, far less any thought of suffering and death for His Name’s sake. **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** famously said: “When Jesus calls a man, He bids him come and die”.¹ This echoes the Saviour’s mind for Smyrna when He promises believers: “the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death” (Rev 2:11). **The paradox of the dying conqueror is nothing less than Jesus’ own strategy. He died to defeat death!**

‘Slimming world’ – for faith

Faithfulness unto death is the far end of endurance, a disturbing notion for the comfortable Christian. Perseverance has never been a popular theme in the church, perhaps because we are all quitters by preference – otherwise, why would God’s Word have so many injunctions to not become weary and to receive strength from God? (Ps 84:5-7; Isa 40:28-31; Gal 6:9) Most of us have never read inspiring Christian biographies. Perhaps even our Bible diet is a bit thin – and our faith, by consequence, as thin as the population of an average prayer meeting... Admittedly, real prayer – as opposed to a ‘spot of prayer’ at the end of an evening – is hard work. Again, we’ve probably never read the accounts of believers for whom hours of daily prayer were a joy, not a burden, because they found their joy in God! Thus, do many live out their dull Christian existence, allowing Netflix or the BBC to feed their thin Christian souls, excusing themselves from the exertions of too-serious pursuits like Bible study – far less, intercession or spiritual warfare.

They can’t confirm if God tastes good – and they can’t seem to find the appetite... (Ps 34:8).

Now let’s be clear... Jesus came, not to bring condemnation, but to lift it. But having done so – at His own expense – He sent the Holy Spirit to discipline our wandering feet, and to bring us conviction and correction, should we need it. That Bible whose influence we keep tightly closed on a shelf is still subversively at work in our lives. God’s Word has already spoken into us and will give us no peace until it can return to its Speaker full of success. (Isa 55:11) We have heard it say: “Wake, O sleeper. Rise from the dead and Christ will shine upon you”. (Eph 5:14) We know that it offers no support to our ‘Convenience Christianity’. It shakes us out of our pyjamas and into our work clothes – armour even – for the God-ordained rigors that will form the character of Christ in us and hallow His Name by our dying way of living.

His Name is not hallowed by accident. But it is dishonoured by neglect. The Lord’s Prayer – which is really the disciples’ prayer, given for our instruction – puts “*Hallowed be Thy Name*” as a primary aim of discipleship. He is hallowed when we live holy. He is disrespected when we are indistinguishable from our surrounding culture. He did not say “Go into all the world and learn from it”. He said “Go... teach...”. A ‘church’ shaped by a society which suicidally prefers darkness to light is a ‘church’ that has abandoned the Word of Life. Where the Word is rejected, the Holy Spirit will not remain – even if the clergy do... Two things are impossible in the spiritual realm: neutrality and a vacuum. If a ‘church’ does not stand with Jesus, who does it stand with? If the ‘church’ is vacated by the Spirit of Jesus, which spirit will give direction?

The world says: “Go on... pamper yourself. You know you deserve it”. The bible reveals that what we deserve happened to Jesus at Calvary. Our debt was unpayable and only the Creditor could

release us and restore us to fellowship with Himself: “Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God...” (1 Pet 3:18) The world says: “Deny yourself nothing – seek happiness”. The Bible says of God: “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” (Psalm 16:11) **Top that!**

The world says ‘Pride’ is a VIRTUE! God’s apostle says: “Christ Jesus ... though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Php 2:5-11)

Jesus is the enemy of pride – not it’s sponsor!

Listen... GOD SENT SINNERS A SAVIOUR! Was that an unintelligent, redundant sacrifice on His part? Or could it be that sin is actually something to be saved from rather than celebrated in the streets – and on police station flagpoles (God help us).

Compare and contrast...

Look at Calvary. See our humble God in His fullness in a humiliated Man on the cross. See what you don’t see... See the Commander of Heaven’s armies suspend His mighty power in mercy – else Rome would be unbuilt in a day. See ‘sorrow and love flow mingled’ from the dozens of lacerations inflicted during the soldiers’ ‘entertainment’ before they nailed Him against a sun-deserted sky... See that all of this was chosen... Jesus was

not passive in all that was done to Him. Events did not overtake Him. “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour.” (John 12:27) Jesus was the principal actor at Calvary. He was the prophesied Man of Sorrows on whom “the iniquity of us all” had been laid “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God”. (Is 53:6; Acts 2:23) Now contrast this divine humility with the putrid demon-doctrine that would have us all endorse Pride as a modern virtue!

Now to return to that sparsely populated prayer meeting... is that not also an expression of pride? Do we neglect prayer in proportion to our self-interest and self-reliance? When we gather for prayer, we are saying to God: “Yes! We are your royal priesthood. We are here to know your mind, to be about our Father’s business – to glorify and enjoy You!”

Do we believe that fleeting pleasures from Netflix or the BBC are to be compared with the “fulness of joy” in the presence of our immortal King? Are we more impressed by this world than the ‘heaven on earth’ which is a true prayer meeting? We can squander our lives on the networks’ repeats – or we can take up His dying way of living... become His first responders in a burning world until we die to live for ever in His presence and... eternal pleasures!

¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 1948/2001), 44.

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