

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(June 21, 2020)

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Sermon manuscript

### **Risks Worth Taking in a “Stay Safe” World** Study #5

(selected passages from the New Testament)

### **Sermon series: When Life Hits Hard**

(selected studies in biblical characters whom life hit hard)

#### **Introduction: The value of staying safe...**

When a teenager leaves home for his or her first foray into the world of solo driving, that teen is guaranteed to hear, “*Be safe!*” as they peel off down the street. They need to hear, “*Be safe!*”

It’s not safe to text while driving, so we don’t do it. Even texting while walking can get us into trouble (as YouTube videos will attest).

COVID-19 is a part of our current reality. So, it makes sense to adjust some daily habits. We have sure adjusted the way we do church. Schools go online, businesses go remote, restaurants separate tables.

Of course, different ones of us may make different adjustments, but we all are aware of the need to stay safe, and we want to keep in mind the safety of others.

Safe living is wise living. It’s foolish to take unnecessary risks for uncertain or minimal gains. It’s better to play it safe. Don’t be reckless. Don’t be stupid. Stay safe out there.

All that being said, this morning we are confronting the reality that there are risks worth taking and that sometimes, there are even risks to playing it safe.

On June 29<sup>th</sup> of 2019, the Voice of the Martyrs began to observe The Day of the Christian Martyr.

That date was chosen because the church has traditionally assigned June 29 as the date that the Apostle Paul was put to death by Rome and in Rome.

Today, we are observing it a bit out of order, calendar-wise, because the theme fits so well into our “When Life Hits Hard” series.

During these few minutes, we are considering those for whom life has hit hard simply because they are following hard after Jesus in places where to do so is risky.

So, interspersed with a few stories, I want to present to you a biblical framework for understanding the life to which Jesus calls us when He invites us to follow Him.

No one who follows Jesus can say that they are surprised if they find themselves opposed for doing so. That’s because predictions of a bumpy road are all over the New Testament.

I saw a great example of this in a young man who wasn’t surprised by opposition on the first trip Todd Havekost and I took to Russia in 1999.

I’ll tell you about that in a minute.

#### **Great Expectations (persecution and hardship don’t surprise us)**

#### **Words About Suffering, from Jesus**

*Don’t be surprised if people hate you (John 16:1)*

First, let’s listen to what Jesus has to say to His disciples about the suffering that will often be part and parcel of following Him.

He is speaking on the night before His death and is preparing His followers for life after He is gone.

***[John 16:1] “These things I have spoken to you that you may be kept from stumbling.” [2] “They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God.”<sup>1</sup>***

This is important.

Those who oppose those of us who follow Jesus and who oppose Christianity, generally, will often do so because they believe that they are doing the right thing. They aren't going out of their way to do something that they know is bad.

Religious people who oppose Christians think they are pleasing God by doing so. People who oppose on philosophical grounds do so because they think Christianity is built on an intellectually flawed foundation.

In the first several centuries after Christ lived, false rumors were spread about what Christians did during their secret worship services that would make any normal person oppose Christians.<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes, the opposition will involve making Christians outcasts or name-calling. But that comment in John 16 and this one that follows from Matthew also warn us that following Him may result in physical suffering, too.

*Don't be surprised if you physically suffer (Matthew 10:16-17)*

***[Matthew 10:16] “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.***

***[17] “But beware of men, for they will hand you over to the courts and scourge you in their synagogues.***

If you take the time to skim a book like [Foxy's Book of Martyrs](#) or if you view the resources you can find on the Voice of the Martyrs website, you'll see that what Jesus warned against in the first century has been rampant through the centuries and is rampant today.

**Release International** (a ministry that serves the worldwide persecuted church) estimates that every month, an average of:

- 333 Christians are martyred for their faith.
- 66 Christian churches are attacked.
- 218 Christians are arrested and imprisoned without a trial.
- 180 Christian women are raped, sexually harassed, or forced into a marriage with a man who is hostile to Christianity.

And those statistics don't take into account the many Christians who just *disappear* in places where hatred for Christianity is fiercest.

Not every Christian will suffer extreme persecution. But there are certain people could NOT be surprised, because Jesus explicitly told them that they would suffer for His sake.

For instance, after His resurrection, Jesus told the Apostle Peter that he would die a martyr's death. (John 21) Then, He told the man who would welcome Paul (then Saul of Tarsus) into the faith (Ananias) to let Paul know that he, who had made a lot of people suffer for Jesus, would suffer a lot for Jesus. (Acts 9)

But scattered throughout the ancient letters that were written to Christians like us are all-purpose comments that make clear that suffering for the sake of Christ won't be remarkable among those who follow Him.

### **Words About Suffering, from the Apostles**

The apostles took it upon themselves to tell those they loved that suffering very often went hand-in-hand with serious discipleship.

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<sup>1</sup> See also Matthew 10:16-23; - disciples of Jesus will be scourged and hated because of Him; John 15:18-25 - the world hated Jesus and will hate disciples, too.  
<sup>2</sup> Cairns, Christianity Through the Centuries, pp. 95ff - Christians were accused of incest, cannibalism, and other unnatural practices because of a misunderstanding of what went on at private worship services.

John, writing late in life, told his readers, ***“Don’t be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you.”*** (1 John 3:13). And Peter wrote that if Christ - the Son of God - suffered, Christ-ones should expect it as well. (1 Peter 2:21-25)

Paul did the same thing. The last letter we have from Paul was written from a Roman dungeon just before he was put to death. He wrote to his dear friend and partner in serving Jesus, Timothy.

In this letter, he told Timothy to not be ashamed of him (Paul) and his frequent stints in prison. He invited Timothy to join him in suffering for the Gospel. (2 Timothy 1:8, 12)

Now think about that.

Paul and Timothy were good friends. Maybe best friends.

Paul was a mentor in Timothy’s life. They were allies. Paul clearly loved Timothy...and he urged Timothy to do the things that would result in suffering for Jesus.

This was not Paul being a sadist or a masochist. He was a realist who had come to believe that the best life Timothy could live was the life of laying it all on the line and risking it all for Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

From Paul’s perspective, taking risks for Jesus that might result in suffering for Jesus was central to what following Jesus was all about.

The young man I mentioned a minute ago knew all of this, firsthand.

He lived in one of the Central Asian republics that had made up the Soviet Union and he had come to the city of Nizhznensk where Todd and I were doing some Bible teaching to some Russian pastors.

To wrap up the two weeks there, everyone from the conference was seated for a banquet. Sitting next to me was a translator and across the table was this young man from *“something-or-other...stan”*.

I was asking him questions about his life back home and he told me of something that routinely happened in his culture when a Muslim was baptized as a Christian.

Up until the baptism, the Muslims in the city left the convert alone. But after baptism, which is a statement of identifying as a believer and as a follower of Jesus, the convert was routinely beaten.

It happened to this man I was speaking to and he told me about it. He was completely calm in telling the story. There was no shock on his face.

He wasn’t taken by surprise by the beating because he had read in his New Testament to expect opposition for following Jesus.

Today, you and I are fore-armed when it comes to suffering for Jesus because we have been fore-warned. So were the first Christians for whom suffering came early.<sup>4</sup>

### **Describing Suffering for Christ**

#### **The Record of Acts**

There is no question but that following Jesus brings lots of blessings and benefits.

Our sins are forgiven and we receive eternal life with God. The Holy Spirit takes up permanent residence in our hearts and we’re part of a family that includes everyone who has ever believed in Jesus.

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<sup>4</sup> The first to suffer was the man who had been born blind and who was given sight by Jesus. (John 9) When He confessed his faith in Christ (whom he had yet to see), the Jewish rulers excommunicated him.

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<sup>3</sup> See also Philippians 1:29-30 and 1 Thessalonians 3:1-4; 7.

And while all of that is true, there is this major thread running through the book of Acts showing that following Jesus may well bring increased hardship.

Not long after the church was established in Jerusalem, the apostles were arrested - twice! - for performing miracles of healing in Jesus' Name and for proclaiming that He was the Messiah. (Acts 4:1-4, 13-22; 5:18-20, 40-42)

Then, in short order:

- Stephen was stoned to death for preaching Jesus (Acts 7:54-60).
- Saul of Tarsus launched an offensive against Christians, arresting them and throwing them in jail and killing them if possible (Acts 8:1-3); and
- the Apostle James was put to death by Herod. (Acts 12:1-5)

The theme of persecution continues through Acts, focusing mainly on what happened to Saul (now the Apostle Paul).

### **Case Study: Paul**

#### *Three risky missionary journeys*

On the first missionary journey, Paul and his friend Barnabas faced opposition in Pisidian Antioch and Iconium (Acts 13:48-52) and Paul was stoned nearly to death in Lystra (Acts 14:19)

On the second missionary journey, he and his friend, Silas, were arrested, beaten, and thrown into jail in Philippi for exorcising a demon from a slave girl and for preaching Jesus. (Acts 16:22-24)

And on the third missionary journey, while in Ephesus, opposition forces instigated a riot against Paul and his friends aimed at overwhelming the Christians. (Acts 19:28-41)

#### *Notes of suffering from Paul's letters*

In the letters Paul wrote to churches we learn of the beatings he endured at the hands of Jews and of Romans, imprisonments, and dangers of all kinds.

He wrote of shipwrecks (also Acts 27), sleeplessness, terrible weather, lack of food (see 2 Corinthians 11:23-26, 30-33), and abandonment by co-workers. (2 Timothy 4:9-17)

There were times when he despaired of life itself (2 Corinthians 1:8-11) and the scars on his body bore witness to how much he had suffered. (Galatians 6:17)<sup>5</sup>

Paul's life was made immeasurably richer by Jesus, but it sure wasn't made easier. And there are millions of Christians in the world right now who would say, "AMEN!" to that: Richer and harder.

If you want to learn about the lives of these courageous disciples, there's a great tool available and I highly recommend it. It'll inform you and will help you to remember and to pray for those who are suffering for Jesus in 2020.

#### *A handy tool...*

The Voice of the Martyrs digital presence includes an app that focuses on a different country each day where Christians face persecution.

Most every day, Kathy and I pray for the spotlighted country before we eat breakfast. In recent days, here are some of the people and needs for which we've prayed.

- Ethiopia - for believers whose churches have been destroyed.
- Burma (Myanmar) - for those who have lived in the 3,000+ Christian villages that have been burned in recent years.
- Chiapas, Mexico - for freedom of worship for Christians.
- Tunisia - for the protection of believers against attacks from those who oppose Christians.
- Indonesia - that the front-line workers will be bold and wise as they share the Gospel.

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<sup>5</sup> See also Romans 8:36-37; Ephesians 3:13; Philippians 1:12-13; 3:8; 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2:9; 14-15; 2 Timothy 4:6.

It's easy to sign up for the app - even I did it! - and you'll be better able to keep your suffering family in mind each and every day.

Another way to stay informed is by learning the particular stories of individual Christians, which The Day of the Christian Martyr allows us to do. Here's the story being highlighted this year.

*The Day of the Christian Martyr: Pastor Jean-Paul Sankagui*

In 1993, Pastor Jean-Paul Sankagui planted a church in a Muslim neighborhood outside Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic. For many years he maintained good relations with the broader Christian and Islamic communities in the city.

Unfortunately, a civil war that began in 2013 changed everything. The friendliness the Christians had known in the region faded. Soon even tolerance went away.

Most of Pastor Jean-Pal's church members fled the area as hostility increased toward Christians. His own wife, Mary, urged him to leave, too, and to work someplace safer. But Pastor Jean-Paul stayed in obedience to what he believed God had called him to do.

On Feb. 7, 2017, followers of a powerful Islamic warlord shot Pastor Jean-Paul to death outside his church (in the city of Ramandji) before looting and burning his house and church.

Of course, he knew of the danger. But he believed that God's call on his life was to remain, pastor that church and reach all the Muslims he could for Christ. He saw doing this as worth any risk.<sup>6</sup>

Jean-Paul's name is now inscribed on a wall along with others who have given their lives for Christ at the Voice of the Martyrs headquarters in Oklahoma. He is one more powerful example of someone who understood the worth of Christ.

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<sup>6</sup> He and his wife had been married 48 years. They had 11 children and 17 grandchildren. After losing not only her husband but also her home and all her possessions, Mary had no choice but to leave the area.

By remembering him today, we don't worship him. Rather, by hearing his story, we are drawn to worship the One for whom Pastor Jean-Paul died and are inspired to imitate his faith.<sup>7</sup>

He saw it as an honor to stand for Christ and to maintain a faithful walk with Christ while facing tremendous adversity. And he is now watching us run our race, is cheering us on, while Jesus says, "Imitate his faith."

So, the New Testament prepares us for hardship by explicit warning and clear descriptions of what could very well happen. It also tells us how to respond when we are opposed.

In that last letter Paul wrote, he told Timothy, [**2 Timothy 3:12**] ***all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.***

Speaking personally, I have desired and attempted to live godly in Christ Jesus for quite a while. To this point, my life has not been especially marked by persecution.

But if the day comes when I face hardship simply because I am following Jesus, I'll know how I am to respond. So will you.

First, we will bless the one who is making life hard for us.

**Responding to Jesus-Following Induced Hardship**

**Bless, Don't Curse (Romans 12:14)**

***[Romans 12:14] Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.***

Remember Jesus.

When He was reviled, He did not revile in return. When attacked, He didn't go on the offensive or get defensive.

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<sup>7</sup> On the monument: "Shot to death in front of his home by Islamists. When most fled to safety, he chose to stay and maintain a witness for Christ in his region of the CAR."

When He was beaten and scourged and crucified, when Rome did its worst, Jesus forgave them.

And remember Stephen, who remembered Jesus. Stephen was the first Christian martyr. (See Acts 7)

He testified to his own faith in Jesus. He spoke about the Old Testament's witness to Jesus. He reminded his listeners of Jesus' death and resurrection.

And when he finished speaking, the crowd picked up rocks to stone him, and he didn't curse them. As the stones flew and found their mark, he forgave them. Just like Jesus.

A recurring theme I find in the stories of persecuted Christians (stories that are highlighted by organizations that serve them today) is that they don't retaliate when attacked and they don't give as good as they get. They bless and curse not.

If the time comes when we pay the price of suffering just because we follow Jesus, we'll remember Him. We'll love. We'll show grace as we've been shown grace.

And we'll rejoice.

### **Rejoice (Hebrews 10:32-34)**

The author of the book of Hebrews reminds his readers of the terrible humiliations they had suffered for Christ.

Then, he writes, ***[Hebrews 10:34] For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one.***<sup>8</sup>

If we are ostracized for our faith in Jesus, made fun of for how we live for Jesus, or get beaten up and robbed for talking about Jesus, we will rejoice.

Why? Because we have "***better possessions***" than membership in the "in" gang, good reputations, material goods and intact bodies.

And when we begin to face persecution, we won't throw in the towel, either.

### **Persevere**

*DON'T throw in the towel (Hebrews 12:3-4)*

In writing to Christians who were currently suffering for Christ, the author of the book of Hebrews writes, ***[Hebrews 12:3] For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. [4] You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin.***

Just think of all the opportunities Jesus had to call it quits.

- He could have turned back when He was tempted by the devil in the wilderness or when He first tasted rejection in His hometown.
- He could have quit His road to the cross when the Pharisees and scribes ganged up on Him or when His disciples kept missing the main thing.
- He could have thrown in the towel when soldiers arrested Him in the Garden or when standing trial before the Sanhedrin.

But He didn't. He persevered all the way to the end. And if our Savior persevered, we will, too.

Even if it comes to loss and rejection and blood, sweat, and tears. We won't lose heart. We'll keep following, even as we suffer.

One thing that is obvious, but is not often mentioned, is that, generally speaking, people aren't persecuted for being Christians. They are persecuted for being *outspoken* Christians.

We may, at some point, face opposition for being bold for Christ. The temptation will be to tone that boldness down, grow weary, lose heart.

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<sup>8</sup> See also 2 Timothy 2:8-9.

Jesus didn't. He kept speaking the truth, lovingly. We can avoid most opposition by simply being quiet and passive. We won't do that.

We'll keep living boldly and lovingly - even to the point at which our own blood is shed.

That's the kind of faith and faithfulness God wants to build into each of our lives.

Finally, listen to what Jesus has to say about the blessing and the reward that comes to those who are persecuted for His sake and who suffer just because they follow Him.

### **Blessings on Those Who Suffer for Jesus**

***[Matthew 5:10] Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. [11] Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. [12] Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.***<sup>9</sup>

Not long ago, I was talking with someone who was regaling me with tales of the glories of one of his personal passions: Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu.

He told me of an elite Judoka who was competing in a high-level tournament and was trapped by his opponent in an arm bar. This guy my friend was telling me about chose to not submit.

He actually allowed his opponent to crank the arm bar so hard that his arm broke. But, with his broken arm free, he twisted and submitted his opponent, won the match, and thought it was a perfectly great deal.

We may hear that and think, *"That's crazy! Who would want to suffer a broken arm just to win a trophy?"*

To which I say, *"We might quibble with the details. But the essential idea is completely biblical."*

We are willing to suffer greatly for Jesus, take any risk for Him, so that - as we just read - we will win a prize, we will receive a reward.

Foolhardy risks for iffy gains? Not interested. But, as martyred American missionary Jim Elliott said back in 1956 shortly before he lost his life, *"He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."*

### **Conclusion:**

Today, outspoken Christians are suffering for Jesus in dangerous places. The place where we live is less friendly to our faith than it once was. Will that "less friendly" posture continue? Will following Jesus increasingly fall out of favor here?

Who know what the future holds for us who follow Jesus here? I certainly don't. But the COVID-19 phenomenon tells us that things can change in a culture - and they can change fast.

I just began reading a book recommended to me by Alex Mandes, [Canoeing the Mountains](#), written by Tod Bolsinger. The book gives guidance to churches in the face of the changing American scene.

Bolsinger uses the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1803 to find a "northwest passage" across the North American continent to gain insight into how to navigate a situation in which we are *"off the map."*

That phrase comes from the point in the expedition when, after arriving at the headwaters of the Missouri River, the explorers looked over the crest of a mountain to see territory in front of them way more difficult than anything they had yet seen.

They thought that after passing the Missouri, it would be a downhill slide to the Pacific Ocean. Instead, they saw that they still had to cross over the Rocky Mountains.

<sup>9</sup> See also Luke 6:20-23. Also, Romans 8:16-17, 1 Peter 3:13-16, 1 Peter 4:12-16.

From that point on, Lewis and Clark were “*off the map*.” Every step forward was a risky move.

It’s a good illustration, because if it is true that Christians here may be facing hardship just because we are boldly living for Jesus, well, we’ve not seen much of that in America. It’s “*off the map*” - for us.

But, as we’ve seen today, it’s not really off the map at all.

Jesus told us to expect it. He Himself suffered it. The early Christians experienced it. The church through the centuries has lived through it. Believers today are living through it.

The map is the New Testament which tells us that the church is made to thrive in days like these. Christians were redeemed for times like these.

Risk-taking and courage may well be the name of the game, while love, service, prayer, and faithfulness are the rules of the game.

Only God knows what the prize of this game will be. But we do know that our God is a great rewarder and we sure won’t be disappointed in the reward God gives us.