

## Persecuted Christians, Suffering For The Gospel!

I must say that I was particularly moved a few weeks ago when we watched a video here from Open Doors. You may remember it, it was the story of Helen, a Christian in Eritrea who was arrested for singing worship songs on the steps of her own church. She was held captive in a shipping container for 32 months, suffering extreme conditions and tortured horribly in an attempt to make her deny Jesus. But she just kept on singing and preaching the Good News. But she said something in that video that really struck me. For she asked, "Who can preach the gospel? The answer (she said) is simple: Anyone who is not afraid to die."

Or perhaps you remember last year's Bibles for the Persecuted booklet? There were stories in there about Christians rejected and harassed by their families and communities, discriminated against, denied employment, arrested and interrogated, fined and imprisoned. Believers physically beaten, children removed from families, houses burned down, church buildings vandalised.

Do you realise that 1 in 8 followers of Jesus in this world today experience significant persecution, and that 100,000 are killed every single year simply for believing the very same message that we preach in this church? And so obviously Christians like these can very easily understand what Jesus is talking about in Matthew 16.

They can relate to him when he says "that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." But they also know exactly what he means when he says "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it."

## What About Us, What Price Do We Pay?

Persecuted Christians know very well what Jesus is talking about in this passage. But I want to ask you, what do these verses mean for us? What do these verses mean for you and for me as we sit here in our comfortable seats at Riverbank?

Sometimes I imagine what it'd be like to have a conversation with a persecuted believer. Just imagine them, with all their suffering, grief and torment, asking you or me what price we've paid for the sake of the gospel? What would we say?

*"Well I give up a couple of hours a week to attend a worship service, sometimes a bit more for a growth group or a ministry! I give money to the church and other causes, but not at the expense of my own desires! Occasionally I share the gospel resulting in an awkward conversation! Sometimes I'm expected to serve in some way, or attend a training event, or get this one: to come to church at 11 instead of 9:30! And sometimes it all becomes too much, and I just need to cut back and focus on myself!"*

That would be such an awkward conversation wouldn't it? Imagine talking to someone who truly suffers for their faith, who experiences real hardship and puts their life on the line for Christ. And then having to admit to them that we make a fuss over every little inconvenience.

For far too often, my friends, we're so involved in our own lives, our own work, our own families, our own leisure, that we convince ourselves that even the mildest bother for the sake of God is a reason to complain. Of course, we're willing to give out of our spare time and energy, our spare

money and possessions. But the suggestion that we actually go out of our way to make any real and significant sacrifice for the Lord and for his Church is very quickly a bridge too far.

### We Can Be Like Peter, Unwilling To Accept Sacrifice.

Far too often we're just like Peter. Because when Jesus explained to him that he himself must suffer and die, it says "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. Never, Lord! he said. This shall never happen to you!"

In the preceding verses the disciples had for the very first time grasped who Jesus really is. In fact it was Peter who boldly declared, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." But yet here Peter quickly demonstrates that he doesn't yet understand that fundamental to the life and task of the Messiah is suffering and sacrifice. For that's how Jesus would achieve the very purpose for which he came, the redemption of his people, the salvation of our souls.

And so, "Jesus turned and said to Peter, Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." This is a very strong rebuke, it's an unparalleled rebuke. For Peter, in his naivety was tempting Jesus to avoid what lay ahead, he was preventing the fulfilment of God's plan, he was standing in the way of the gospel of salvation. And that put him firmly in the camp of Satan. For he was thinking only of what was good for himself, and not what was good for the Lord and his people and his deliverance.

But the very same thing applied to Peter's understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. For there too he did "not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." And so Jesus said to him and all "his disciples, Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." For you see, just as suffering and sacrifice were fundamental to the life of Christ, so suffering and sacrifice are fundamental to the lives of Christians. Just as Jesus, the Son of the living God, gave up everything to save us from our sin, so we who are saved are called to give up everything as we follow in his footsteps and give our lives for the sake of the gospel.

But far too often you and me, we're just like Peter, we'd rather save our life than lose it, rather gain the whole world while forfeiting our soul. Far too often we're unwilling to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Christ. Far too often we ignore the concerns of God focussing only on this world. And while this is difficult to say, there are even times when we could be accused of doing the devil's work as we ourselves stand in the way of the gospel.

### Like Peter, We Need To Learn To Deny Ourselves.

But Peter eventually learned, didn't he? It took a while. You may remember how he tried to prevent Jesus from washing his feet, how he tried to defend Jesus with a sword in the Garden, how he denied Jesus 3 times when his own safety was at stake. But yet in the end Peter understood. And so you may also remember how he spoke up boldly on the day of Pentecost, and became that Rock upon which Jesus built his church. How he went on great missionary journeys, how he was arrested and imprisoned for the gospel, and in the end (according to the history books) was executed as a martyr in Rome. Peter came to truly understand that genuine discipleship means a life of self-sacrifice. But my friends we need to ask ourselves if we have understood that as well?

For we need to look back to the cross and remember how our Lord Jesus, the Messiah, the perfect Son of the living God, came and willingly gave up his life. How he was tortured, how he was mocked, how he was crucified. And we need to remember that he did it all for us, for the sake of our salvation. For we were sinners destined for hell. But yet in his mercy he stepped in and took our punishment and set us free.

And as a result we've been blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Thanks to Jesus we have a restored relationship with our Creator. We've been released from our sin and our guilt and our shame. We have God's Word, his Church, and his Holy Spirit, we have meaning and purpose in our lives. We can know every single day that Jesus is with us, guiding us, protecting us, strengthening us. We can know his love and his grace and his joy. And we can look forward in certain hope to that wonderful day when we will enter the glory of heaven, and see him face to face, when all our struggles will be gone.

But when we truly come to understand and believe and trust what our Lord Jesus has done, then we'll also accept his calling on our lives. For how could we experience the wonder of his grace and then go on living as though nothing's changed? How could we receive his sacrifice and then not be compelled to sacrifice ourselves in return? And so my friends we too can come to grasp what Jesus means when he calls upon us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him.

For it is the natural response of thankfulness for anyone who grasps what Jesus has done for them. And so then, like our persecuted sisters and brothers around this world, we too will be ready to pay the price, to bear the cost, and give our lives for Jesus Christ.

### Self-Sacrifice And Vision 2030.

But now you may be wondering to yourself, what on earth has this got to do with our Vision 2030? I mean aren't these just some plans that we've made for our congregation here at Riverbank for the next decade? How could they possibly relate to denying self and taking up a cross?

Well you may remember that when Reuben introduced this sermon series, he reminded us that our primary Mission document is the Bible, the Word of God. And so our Vision 2030 simply seeks to capture the heart of God's Word and his will for our lives. And so when Jesus calls on us to follow him, then surely our Vision should somehow encapsulate what that means. And you know, I really think that it does. For what is discipleship if it isn't to be people who love God, love our Community, and love the Church?

For as Reuben also said, this Vision Statement captures the essence of Jesus' great commandment, to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind", and to "Love your neighbour as yourself". But it also captures the essence of Jesus' great commission, to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you".

But the whole point is that if we're truly going to do these things, then it's going to come at a price. You see it's very easy to come up with the words, and put them in a document, and talk about them and preach about them. But it's much, much harder to actually put them into practice.

For while the idea of Loving God, Loving Community and Loving Church may all sound rather simple and easy, the reality is the exact opposite. In 1 John 4 it says "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." That's right my friends, when you hear the word 'love', don't think about nice mushy positive feelings. No, when you hear the word 'love' think of sacrifice. And so we could reword our Vision like this: to be people who sacrifice for God, sacrifice for our community, and sacrifice for the church.

That's why when you dig a bit deeper into that Vision document you find a lot of strong active language. You'll read about glorifying and committing and gathering, about evangelising and welcoming and getting involved, about serving and developing and training. And that's why when you dig even deeper still you'll find goals that we've set for our church for the next 10 years. And

quite frankly, those goals are going to involve a lot of hard work, and a lot of adjustment, and a lot of discomfort, and a lot resources, and a lot of changes, and a lot of commitment. But if that shocks you, or upsets you, or even angers you, then perhaps you've still not understood what it really means to be a follower of Christ and part of his Church.

### The Cost Of Loving God.

I mean think about the first part of our Vision, to Love God. Does that come at a cost? Well in Romans 12 Paul says, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

And in Hebrews 13 it says, "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased."

### The Cost Of Loving Our Community.

Or what about the second part of our vision, to love our community, that is to love the lost. Will that impact our lives? In Acts 20 Paul speaks to the Ephesian Elders and says, "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace."

Or do you remember a few weeks ago when we looked at 2 Corinthians 6? Paul reminds us that we are Christ's ambassadors with a ministry of reconciliation. But then he says, "as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; ... dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

### The Cost Of Loving The Church.

And then there's the third part of our vision, to love the church, to love each other? Does that also involve self-denial? Well Acts 4 describes the early church like this, "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ... And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need."

Or think of 1 Peter 4, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms."

### Vision 2030 Will Come At A Cost.

My friends the Bible makes it abundantly clear that following Jesus comes at a cost. And so we should hardly be surprised that our Vision 2030 comes at a cost. For to love God involves sacrifice, to love our community involves sacrifice, and to love the church involves sacrifice. And we can see that when we look at our goals.

For example, one of our goals is to instil a stronger culture of prayerfulness in our church. But that will never happen if we're unwilling to devote more energy to prayer. It may involve more time praying in our services, and meetings and ministries. It may mean coming to a prayer meeting when you'd rather be doing something else.

Another goal is planting a new congregation, for the sake of the gospel. But that will come with a whole range of costs and sacrifices. It'll take time, it'll take resources, it'll take people, and it'll definitely take a change of attitude and priorities. Yet another goal is to increase our support of missions through our giving, our prayers, and our personal support and participation. And so again the costs involved in this are obvious.

Still another goal is to see our Growth Groups transformed into places of meaningful prayer, life changing Bible study, genuine pastoral care and committed evangelism. But how can that ever happen if we're not prepared to work at it and not prepared to change? And one more example is our goal to see more of us involved in mentoring relationships, opening God's Word together, encouraging and keeping each other accountable before the Lord. But again how can that ever be if we're not willing to give more of ourselves?

### Conclusion.

Friends, I titled this final message in our series, "Vision 2030: What Will It Cost?" And I did that because I know that there have been far too many churches who have come up with grand plans for the future, but those plans have failed because in the end they were unwilling to pay the price.

But what about us, what about you and me? Are you willing to sacrifice more of your time for the sake of the Lord and his kingdom? Are you willing to give more of your money for the sake of the church and of missions? When the call comes for a task to be done, will you be ready to say yes instead of no? My friends are we willing to sacrifice our own self-centredness, our own comfort, our own traditions and long-held views, for the sake of the gospel? I don't doubt that there'll be times when every one of us will find that difficult and we'll resist the changes and we'll say the price is too high. But when that happens, then I urge you to remember Helen and all our brothers and sisters who are persecuted for their faith. And perhaps that will give us some perspective.

But when that happens then let us also remember Jesus. Remember how he, the Messiah, the Son of the living God was willing to suffer and die for your salvation. Remember his challenge to consider if we have in mind the concerns of God, or merely our own self-centred human concerns. And remember his call on our lives, to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. For only then Jesus says will we find life as it was meant to be, full and abundant life, not chasing after worldly pleasures and selfish concerns, but rather self-sacrificing and giving completely of ourselves as we serve our Saviour and our Lord. Amen.