

## Opening Words:

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### 19 Phil The Gift of Suffering

More Christians were martyred for their faith in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in any other century. Surprising isn't it. On our following broadcast I am going to speak with Dr. Carl Moeller, president of Open Doors ministry. He and his organization work with persecuted Christians throughout the world. They provide relief for them and spiritual help. They advocate for them with governments, and they enlist the body of Christ to pray for them. When I was talking with Carl I was surprised to learn that Open Doors works in 60 countries. Yes, 60 countries. That may not be surprising to you but it was to me to learn that that so many countries persecute the followers of Jesus.

Our study in the book of Philippians is to help us take that ancient faith and apply it to modern times. That, if you will remember, is the title for the series – Ancient Faith for Modern Times. We are not just trying to accumulate knowledge or learn a few Greek words but we are in this book so that God's Spirit will work among us just as He worked with Paul and with the Philippian Christians.

And when we look at Paul's words to us in verses 27-30 of chapter 1, we find that the subject is very serious indeed!

<sup>27</sup> Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; <sup>28</sup> in no way alarmed by *your* opponents—which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that *too*, from God. <sup>29</sup> For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, <sup>30</sup> experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear *to be* in me

We have opponents, Paul tells us. Let's be real – not everyone, even in the United States, loves what we stand for. Some ridicule us. Some ignore us and treat us as mindless and inferior people. But some know the stakes involved and they know that Christianity is what stands between them and their agenda. They do everything they can to undermine us and to weaken the hold of Christianity in our culture.

We live in a day with a growing atheistic movement – in fact, an evangelistic atheistic movement. They rent billboards, write books, conduct interviews, give lectures, debate Christians and do everything they can to turn people away from Christ and toward belief in God. They want a world free of belief in god – a world free of what you believe.

Yes, we have opponents but before I name a few more I want to make sure that you do not have two responses today. First, don't be afraid. Paul said, "in no way be alarmed by your opponents." Don't let them scare you! The word picture from the Greek New Testament is that of horses who are trained to withstand loud noises in battle. If you are mounted on a horse and you are in a battle, you do not want your horse to be skittish or to rear itself and throw you off. You want a mount that is steady in the midst of conflict. Paul tells us to be the same way – in no way be alarmed by your opponents.

This is what Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 10:28-30.

Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. <sup>29</sup> Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. <sup>30</sup> But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. <sup>31</sup> So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows.

Listen to what Peter said in chapter 3:14-15 of his first epistle:

<sup>14</sup> But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED, <sup>15</sup> but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always *being* ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence;

Here's a second wrong response we can have. It's not in the text, but it certainly is true in experience. We can become militant and hateful. Yes, we have opponents, but really, our opponent is a spiritual one behind them. Our mission is to win, even our enemies, even our opponents. Listen to how Paul described the unbelieving Jews to whom he reached out.

<sup>28</sup> From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers;

Yes, in one way they are enemies, but we have to remember that God still loves them and we must love them too. Remember, Paul supplicated in prayer for them and would have been willing to take the judgment of God in their behalf! That's genuine love for his enemies. So, while we recognize we have enemies, that doesn't mean that we shout at them, hate them, ignore them, or ridicule them. We don't treat them the way they may treat us. We must love them even as we sanctify Christ as Lord in our hearts and speak to them with gentleness and reverence.

Let me quickly identify some other challenges, some other "opponents", so to speak, we face in our day. Humanism is one. Humanism sounds so good because it focuses on the good of humanity but without God. Let me read to you the definition of humanism from one of their leading websites: Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism and other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.

Sounds great, doesn't it. But we must stand with the Gospel explaining that we must put God at the center and not man and that only by doing this can we truly help our fellow man.

Another opponent is naturalism. Some people call it scientific naturalism, but I don't see much scientific about it so I just call it naturalism. Naturalism is the belief that the universe, that matter is eternal. We live in a fixed system where everything evolved by time and chance without the guiding hand of God. This has captured our educational system today and the next generation I am afraid will show the disastrous results of this philosophy.

Another opponent is new age mysticism. This is ancient pantheism in modern dress. Mysticism, whether it is part of an ancient tradition such as Buddhism or some form of Hinduism, or some new fad or twist on these ancient traditions, teaches that the universe is all there is but that there is a spiritual side to it and this spiritual side permeates everything. Our goal is to get in touch with it and to realize our own divinity. Everything is part of God. God is all and all is god.

These are some of the many opponents we face today and in the west they present many challenges for us, but in some parts of the world the opponents are more aggressive. They imprison, and often they kill.

I learned that if you are found with a Bible in North Korea, you go to jail for three years, automatically. If you were to go to Saudi Arabia, even as a guest of the country and work, you would not be allowed to gather with other Christians from other countries and worship.

A friend of mine works in India. He has travelled to the state of Uttar Pradesh, a province of 200,000,000 people that is destitute materially and spiritually. The oppression there is palpable. He has travelled there and shared his faith and militant Hindus have told him that if they ever see him there again they will kill him. Some Indian evangelists were threatened in the same way but they were badly beaten.

Yes, it is real and it is around the world. But I have good news for you – nothing can separate us from the love of Christ and the testimony of those who suffer is that Christ is with them and that it is a privilege to suffer for him and to be considered worthy of such an honor.

This lines up with Paul's words. Look at them again with me in 1:29: For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake."

How's that for a gift – suffering! It has been granted to you not only to believe but to suffer. Christ has been gracious to us in calling us out of darkness into life and enabling us to believe. Faith is a gift from God. He is the one who initiates it and inspires us and cultivates it in us so that we can come to a point where we believe. And in this light, we can say that faith is a gift. It is granted to us to believe and God has granted so many other things to us – spiritual gifts, ministry opportunities, family members, food, the enjoyment of life. God is a good God and wants to give good things to his children but the passage before us also says that He grants us suffering. "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake."

What is our tendency? It is to recoil from it. Of course – no one wants to suffer. Even Christ recoiled from the horrors of the cross that awaited him, but we must gain a biblical perspective on it and realize

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that God works wonders in our hearts as endure for him, that God saves other people through our example of suffering, and that we draw near to Christ in unfathomable ways during our times of suffering for him. Suffering is a gift.