

What Would You Die For?

The True Christian Martyr

Martin G. Collins

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— Jesus Christ died for us so that we might be children of His Kingdom. He was the epitome of the innocent martyr for peace and reconciliation. His convictions were based on mercy, truth, love and sacrifice. Christ not only died so that we may have eternal life, but He also lived and died for His Kingdom! As a begotten child of God, destined to be a king and priest in His Kingdom, are you willing to die, if need be, for that same Kingdom?

What would you die for? Hopefully, most parents would die for their children. The American soldier is willing to die for his country, that is, his fellow Americans. Many of them believe they are willing to die to free the enslaved people of Iraq.

The human shields said they were willing to die for the Iraqi people, until they found out Saddam Hussein was using them for his own purposes and that he is an evil, cruel dictator who has his own subjects put in plastic shredders feet first while still alive. The human shields made an initial mistake. They didn't learn the truth about their choice of causes ahead of time. They didn't think long and hard enough about the true validity of their cause. Without truth there can be no just cause.

Millions of people have died for causes of one type or another—many times for national sovereignty and expansion, and many times for religious reasons.

Look at the statistics regarding martyrdom in world religions since their origin. The figures I'm going to give you are for people regarded as martyrs by their own religions:

Islam: Muslim martyrs 80 million

Christianity: Christian martyrs 70 million

Hinduism: Hindu martyrs 20 million

Buddhism: Buddhist martyrs 10 million

Judaism: Jewish martyrs 9 million

Ethno-religions: Ethnic martyrs 6 million

Others: Other religious martyrs 5 million

Sikhism: Sikh martyrs 2 million

Baha'i: Baha'i martyrs 1 million

That is a substantial amount of people dying in the name of religion!

70 million mainstream Christians killed for their beliefs in 220 countries across 20 centuries.

1% of all Christians are martyred each year.

2% of the mainstream Christian clergy are martyred each year.

What meaning, if any, does martyrdom hold for us? Is it, as some would argue, a hopelessly idealistic or old-fashioned expectation for someone to give up his or her very life for a greater good? Depending on how you define martyrdom—and we may find at least a couple of different interpretations—it's not unusual to think about sacrificing yourself for someone or something else. But what about real physical martyrdom? A true giving of one's life—be that through someone's death, someone's life, or both.

There has been a definite shift in the average person's attitude toward dying for principles and causes. History and research shows that the WWII generation was much more inclined to die for principles than the Baby-boomers or Generation X-ers.

Today people don't see any value in dying for a cause. The typical attitude today may be heard stated something like this: "I'm not sure I would die for a belief. Possibly to protect innocent people from oppression and death, but certainly not for a church, or religious beliefs."

The English word "martyr" is derived from the Greek "martus", which carries the sense of "witness." In the Christian tradition, those who are martyrs have died in witness to Christ. But the image of a martyr also takes in a broader scope of those who die for a noble cause (e.g., for their country or church), choosing death rather than renouncing their principles or commitments.

The image of martyr is more prominent in church history than in the Bible. It is in the centuries since the formation of the Christian church that the admiration of the martyrs and the accounts of their lives have arisen. Nevertheless, the image of the martyr can be found in the Bible, and the broader background of Israelitish martyrdom is crucial for fully understanding the imagery of the death of Jesus. In the Old Testament writings we find occasional glimpses of the martyr image in other contexts.

Abel is the first martyr, slain by an evil brother simply because his own deeds were righteous, an example that prompts John to comment in I John 3, "Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you."

I John 3:10-15 In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

Like other martyrs, Abel's influence lives on as a model of faith. Hebrews 11: 4 says, speaking of Abel, "... he being dead still speaks." Abel's righteous works live on as an example of true selfless faith.

In the story of Saul's sons and grandsons in I Samuel 21 we see innocent victims who are slain

because of Saul's failure to abide by an ancient agreement with the Gibeonites. They were guilty of no duplicity except through the family tie, and yet only their deaths could set the people free.

The most touching Old Testament picture of a martyrdom-like event is in the book of Judges. Jephthah's daughter must carry out her father's wish because of her father's oath to God. Her life is given as forfeit for the people's victory over the Ammonites.

As in the case of Gideon, the spirit of the Lord empowered Jephthah in preparation for battle. Strengthened by this divine designation, he traveled north through the area we sometimes call Trans-Jordan, gathering troops from the tribes of Gad and Manasseh. These two tribes actually split Gilead between them, with Gad receiving the larger share.

Jephthah's desire to defeat the Ammonites was so intense that he made a special vow to the Lord. Though intended as an act of devotion, it showed a lack of faith in God's enabling power.

Judges 11:29-31 Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and passed through Mizpah of Gilead; and from Mizpah of Gilead he advanced toward the people of Ammon. And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, "If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering."

Human sacrifice is strictly forbidden by God's law; so Jephthah should have known that God's favor could not be gained in this terrible way. But, Israel's neighbors—especially the Ammonites—sacrificed their children; and this pagan custom may have influenced Jephthah.

Judges 11:32-34 So Jephthah advanced toward the people of Ammon to fight against them, and the LORD delivered them into his hands. And he defeated them from Aroer as far as Minnith—twenty cities—and to Abel Keramim, with a very great slaughter. Thus the people of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel. When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, there was his daughter, coming out to meet him with timbrels and dancing; and she was his only child. Besides her he had neither son nor daughter.

Even in his desperation Jephthah probably did not have this ultimate price for victory in mind. Since he didn't have a son or another daughter, her death would mean the end of his family line. She was his "only child," is a term of special endearment (It is also used in Jeremiah 6: 26; Zechariah 12: 10). The same word is used of Isaac in Genesis 22: 2, 12, 16.

Judges 11:35-36 And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he tore his clothes, and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low! You are among those who trouble me! For I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot go back on it." So she said to him, "My father, if you have given your word to the LORD, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, because the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the people of Ammon."

Jephthah's daughter sensed the implications of her father's vow but made no attempt to get him to break it. Her willingness to yield herself resembled that of another only child, Isaac. Even if victory over Ammon meant her life, to her it seemed worth it; so she gently encouraged her father to perform his vow.

Judges 11:37-40 Then she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: let me alone for two months, that I may go and wander on the mountains and bewail my virginity, my friends and I." So he said, "Go." And he sent her away for two months; and she went with her friends, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains. And it was so at the end of two months that she returned to her father, and he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed. She knew no man. And it became a custom in Israel that the daughters of Israel went four days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

(It is possible that Jephthah dedicated his daughter to the Lord for temple service instead of sacrificing her as a burnt offering. We certainly hope so.)

The inspiring image of her sacrifice was kept alive by subsequent generations. The death of this seemingly innocent girl came because of a rash vow. Jephthah knew that it was a sin to break a vow, but in this case it was a greater sin to fulfill it. This type of punishment was a strong curse reserved for the enemies of God, but Jephthah's daughter had done nothing to deserve such a fate.

According to Proverbs 26: 2, "Like a flitting sparrow, like a flying swallow, so a curse without cause shall not alight." Or, in other words, "An undeserved curse does not come to rest."

Regarding Proverbs 26: 2, Barnes Notes says, "Vague as the flight of the sparrow, aimless as the wheeling [i.e., the steering] of the swallow, is the causeless curse. It will never reach its goal." The Hebrew, however, uses "to him" instead of "not" or "never;" i.e., "The causeless curse, though it may pass out of our [awareness], like a bird's track in the air, will come on the man who utters it." An English proverb is similar, "Curses, like young chickens, always come home to roost."

So Jephthah's vow was actually the pronouncement of a curse upon his family. He made this vow as a result of faithlessness and without basing it on truth, so the martyrdom of his daughter was faithless and in vain.

Similar to Jephthah's vow, the oath Saul took, and Jonathan inadvertently violated, caused Saul to conclude that his son must die, but the people rescued Jonathan (I Samuel 14). Likewise, though Jephthah sincerely believed God required him to go through with his promise, he was badly mistaken and showed that his supposed faith in God was more a superstitious belief.

Jephthah was only right in not being deterred from keeping his vow by the loss and sorrow to himself, just as Abraham was right in not withholding his son, his only son, from God, when commanded to offer him up as a burnt-offering. But Jephthah was wholly wrong in his conception of the character of God that led to his making the rash vow. And he would have done right not to slay his child, though the guilt of making and of breaking such a vow would have remained. The sacrifice was "neither sanctioned by God's law, nor acceptable to God."

Jephthah's daughter's heroic zeal for the honor of God and Israel, though alloyed with foolishness and indiscretion, is worthy to be remembered. This rare instance of one that preferred the public interest before life itself is preserved in the pages of the Bible so that it is never forgotten. She was so pleased with the victory as a common benefit that she was willing to be offered up as a burnt-offering for it. She apparently thought of it as an honor to die, not as a sacrifice of atonement for the people's sins (that honor was reserved for Christ only), but as a sacrifice of acknowledgment for the mercy delivered upon the people.

A major difference between worldly martyrs and true Christian martyrs is that Christian martyrs lose their lives for the sake of God's truth, for God's way of life—a way of life that glorifies God—a way of life that prepares us for the kingdom of God. But worldly martyrs lose their lives for the sake of causes devoid of truth, having wrong convictions. That is a major difference between God's people dying as martyrs and the world's. Look at the tens of millions of people who have died for this world's religions. It was all done for wrong convictions, not for truth.

In the New Testament, Stephen stands out as one who exemplifies the meaning of Jesus' instruction of following Him. Acts 6 describes Stephen as a man of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, who the 12 apostles ordained a deacon with six other qualified men.

Acts 6:1-5, 8-15 Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a murmuring against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." And the saying pleased the whole multitude. . . . And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us." And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.

In Acts 7:1-53 Luke records Stephen's address in which Stephen witnesses about: the call of Abraham; the patriarchs in Egypt; God's delivery of Israel by Moses; Israel's rebellion against God; God's true Tabernacle; and, Israel's resistance against the Holy Spirit.

Stephen's desire, in his message to the high priest and Sanhedrin, was to raise a prophetic voice within Israel, pleading for a radical recasting of Jewish life to make Jesus and God the

Father, rather than the traditional Jewish holy things, the center of worship and thought.

Stephen was committed to his belief in Jesus Christ as his Savior and King. He showed the logical consequences of commitment to Jesus and attributed Israel's rejection of its Messiah to a perpetual callousness of heart.

Stephen's message was flagrant apostasy to the ears of the Sanhedrin. While his purpose was to denounce the "status quo mentality" that had grown up around the land, the law, and the Temple, thereby clearing a path for a positive response to Jesus as Israel's Messiah. This was taken as a frontal attack against the Jewish religion in its official and popular forms.

Acts 7:54-56 When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

While the content and tone of his address infuriated the council, Stephen's solemn pronouncement raised again the specter of blasphemy and brought his hearers to a frenzied pitch.

Only a few years before, Jesus stood before this same tribunal and was condemned for answering positively the high priest's question as to His being Israel's Messiah and for saying of Himself: "you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

Now Stephen was saying, in effect, that his vision confirmed Jesus' claim and condemned the council for having rejected Him. Unless the council members were prepared to repent and admit their terrible mistake, they had no option but to find Stephen also guilty of blasphemy. If he had been judged only an impertinent apostate, the 39 lashes of Jewish punishment would have been sufficient. To be openly blasphemous before the council as well was a matter that demanded death, by their laws.

In verse 55, the bringing together of "the glory of God" and the name of Jesus, therefore, shows something about His person as the manifestation of the divine nature and the divine mode of being. Just as God dwells in the highest heaven, the open heaven with Christ at God's right hand shows something about His work as providing access into the very presence of God.

Bruce, in his Book of the Acts, emphasizes the idea of "witness" as indicated by Jesus' "standing" in verse 56:

Stephen has been confessing Christ before men, and now he sees Christ confessing His servant before God. The proper posture for a witness is the standing posture. Stephen, condemned by an earthly court, appeals for vindication to a heavenly court, and his vindicator in the supreme court is Jesus, who stands at God's right hand as Stephen's advocate.

Acts 7:57-6 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the

witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Stephen's cries are reminiscent of Jesus' words from the stake in Luke 23: 34, 46, though the parallelism of sequence and wording is not exact. The parallelism here was probably included to show that the same spirit of commitment and forgiveness that characterized Jesus' life and death was true of his earlier followers.

The expression "fell asleep" in verse 60 is the Greek word "koimao" and is a common biblical way of referring to the death of God's own. It's found at least 9 times in the Bible.

Stephen shows us how very differently death is bested by him who dies in Christ than by the ancient philosopher or the unbelieving martyr. The true Christian martyr sees Christ as the Conqueror of death. He has the faith that the death he must undergo is already conquered by Christ who has Himself already endured it.

Jesus had called his own disciples to the realization that suffering is not only his destiny, but theirs also. Jesus admonishes us not to desire to save ourselves. He means to renounce self—to cease to make self the object of our lives and actions.

Mark 8: 34-35 When He had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.

This is a choice each and everyone of us makes.

This statement relates to a situation in which Christians face the alternatives of faithfully confessing Christ or denying Him. Jesus warns that by denying Him, our physical life may be saved; but our eternal life will be lost. Conversely, to lose our physical life by remaining true to Christ, for example, by faithfully confessing Him under duress, is to gain the gift of salvation and eternal life.

The phrase "For My sake" stresses the absoluteness of Jesus' claim for our obedience, loyalty and allegiance. The phrase, for "the gospel's" sake is a reference to the preaching of God's way of life and the proclamation of the coming Kingdom of God, for which we are to give our lives as witnesses.

Mark 8: 36-38 "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."

This renouncement of self involves fundamental reorientation of the principle of life. God, not self, must be at the center of our life.

Being willing to die for someone or some principle requires continuous commitment. Synonyms for "commitment" are: promise, pledge, responsibility, resolution, duty, engagement, assurance, undertaking and covenant.

What is the difference between the convictions of people in the world compared with members of God's true church?

Conviction Defined:

The meaning of conviction as a law term is "being found guilty."

In common language it means "being persuaded or convinced."

In theology it means "being condemned at the base of one's own conscience as a sinner in view of the law of God." It is the antecedent to repentance and is often accompanied by a painful sense of exposure to God's wrath. It is the work of the Holy Spirit, showing the heinousness of sin and the person's exposure to divine wrath.

The purpose of conviction is to lead a person to repent of his sins (Acts 2: 37-38; Romans 2: 1-4) and to turn to God for salvation and eternal life. Conviction is the first stage of repentance, when a remorseful person is led to see the evil nature of sin, and has been genuinely convinced that he is guilty of it. The agent of conviction is the Holy Spirit (John 16: 7-11).

The means of conviction is either the Word of God (Acts 2: 37) or God's general revelation of His demands through nature and man's inborn consciousness of a sense of right and wrong (Romans 1: 18-20; 2: 15).

Conviction always implies the presentation of evidence and truth. It is a decision presumed to be based upon a careful and discriminating consideration of all the proofs offered, and has a legal character, the verdict being rendered either in God's judgment, or before men by an appeal to their consciences in which God's law is written (Romans 2: 15).

Spiritual conviction differs from legal conviction. Legal arises from a consideration of the divine law, God's justice, power, or omniscience. Spiritual arises from God's goodness and holiness as seen in the cross of Christ, and from a separation from sin. Legal wishes freedom from penalty and pain. Spiritual from sin and misery. Legal hardens the heart and spiritual softens it.

The apostle Paul illustrated by contrasting lists of the works of the flesh and of the fruit of the Spirit, that the Spirit and flesh are in conflict. By raising these specifics of conduct, he also provides a checklist for measuring the conduct of those who consider themselves spiritual. If our conduct is characterized by the traits in the list of the works of the flesh, then we are not led by God's Spirit. The same holds true for churches.

Galatians 5:16-21 I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the

like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Paul continued the contrast between the natural productions of the flesh and Spirit he had begun in verse 19. Next, he speaks of the "fruit" of the Spirit in contrast to the "works" of which the flesh is capable. The term "works" refers to what man can do.

The fruit of the Spirit, on the other hand, suggests that which is a natural product of the Spirit rather than of man, made possible by the living relationship between the true Christian and God.

Galatians 5:22-26 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Verse 17 says, there is in every one a struggle between the flesh and the Spirit: The flesh (the corrupt and carnal part of us) lusts (strives and struggles with strength and vigor) against the Spirit: it opposes all the motions of the Spirit, and resists every thing that is spiritual.

On the other hand, the Spirit (the renewed part of us) strives against the flesh, and opposes the will and desire of it. Because of this, our character is developed in such a way that we cannot do the things of the world. As the Spirit of righteousness in us will not allow us to do all the evil that our corrupt nature wants us to do, so neither can we do all the good that we want to do because of the oppositions we meet with from corrupt and carnal human nature. There is a constant warring within ourselves between these two.

The convictions of our conscience and the corruption of our own human nature strive with one another; our convictions overcome our corruptions, and our corruptions interfere with our convictions. In a natural man there is something of this struggle so in a renewed man, where there is good character, there is a struggle between the old nature and the new nature—the remainders of sin and the beginnings of righteousness. This is what we can expect as long as we continue as physical human beings in this world. It is a battle we have to work hard at, to make sure that we are utilizing the Spirit of God and producing the fruit of the Spirit.

It is our duty and in our best interest in this struggle to side with Jesus in us, to side with our convictions based on faithfulness and truth against our corruptions, and with the righteous part of our character against our lusts. This the apostle Paul presents as our duty as Christians.

In verses 16 and 25, Paul gives us one general rule, that, if carefully kept, is the most effective deterrent against corruption; and that is to walk in the Spirit.

The New Testament is more reticent than the later church to dwell on martyrdom, maybe so as to not detract from the epitome of martyrdom. Revelation 1:5 calls Him: "Jesus Christ, the faithful witness [or martyr]."

In the crucified Messiah we see true Christian martyrdom in its purest form—the innocent slain for the guilty, and the hero for those who reject him. Isaiah's description of the suffering Servant uses language that is rich with imagery of the innocent martyr:

Isaiah 53:5-6 But He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

The theme of Jesus' willing and noble death must be read, in part, as a noble martyr's death. Jesus' death stands squarely within the context of the story of Israel, and in the resolution of Israel's plight the New Testament sees the redemption of the world. Jesus, proclaiming the coming judgment upon unbelieving Israel, called upon the memory of a whole line of martyrs:

Matthew 23:31-35 "Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' guilt. Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.

Jesus Christ is the epitome of the true martyr—He was innocent of any wrong. He was peaceful and kind, and honest and sincere. What happened to Jesus Christ on the last day of His earthly life—Passover, A.D. 31—highlighted the whole purpose of His coming. It called attention to a dimension of His gospel that most people overlook!

Pilate asked the Jewish mob, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" Prompted by the angry mob, he then asked Christ, "Are You King of the Jews?" Pilate was personally sensitive to any wind of insurrection against the Roman government. Consequently, he did everything he could to keep any public uproar from getting out of hand.

When asked if He was a king, Christ didn't downplay what Pilate meant by "king." Jesus simply told Pilate who He really was: "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world."

At His birth, Jesus was recognized as a king. When the wise men from the east came to bring gifts to the infant Christ, they came to pay homage to a king. When they reached Jerusalem they inquired, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" They were not looking for a religious leader or a reformer, but for a king.

The question created quite a stir in Jerusalem. King Herod, then ruler under the Romans, called on the chief priests and scribes for more information about the birth of Christ and whereabouts of this king. They quoted Micah 5:2. The account is recorded in Matthew 2.

Matthew 2:5-6 "So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.'"

These were not words about a man of religion, but about a literal ruler.

Herod felt threatened politically by this attention to a potential new king born in his territory. He reacted by massacring all male children age 2 and under in Bethlehem.

Christ was born to be a king. But what kind of king? Merely a symbolic entity? A kind of spiritual figurehead for an emerging religion?

The angel who announced Jesus' birth to Mary told her what kind of king He would be:

Luke 1:32-33 "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."

The prophet Isaiah spoke of Christ's coming:

Isaiah 9:6-7 For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.

At least five glorious things are stated in verse 7 about Christ's kingdom:

1. It shall be an increasing government. It shall be multiplied. The bounds of His Kingdom shall be more and more enlarged, and many shall be added to it. The luster of it shall increase, and it shall shine more and more brightly.
2. It shall be a peaceable government, agreeable to His character as the Prince of Peace. He shall rule by love. He shall rule in men's hearts—so that wherever his government is there shall be peace, and as his government increases the peace will increase.
3. It shall be a rightful government. He that is the Son of David shall reign upon the throne of David and over his kingdom, which he is entitled to. God will give him the throne of his father David.
4. It shall be administered with prudence and equity. Everything will be well managed in the kingdom of Christ, and none of his subjects will ever have cause to complain.
5. It shall be an everlasting Kingdom. There will be no end to the happiness of the subjects of this kingdom. He will reign forever. Not only throughout all generations of time, but, even when the Kingdom will be delivered to God the Father, the glory both of the Redeemer and the redeemed will continue eternally.

Are you willing to die, if need be, to have a part in the Kingdom of God? Jesus Christ was and He did!

Daniel, speaking about Christ's future coronation, said,

Daniel 7:14 "Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, That all

peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed."

Christ openly made His role and coming Kingdom known. The biographies of Jesus clearly show us that the main thrust of His work was teaching about the kingdom of God—its way of life and its establishment on earth.

In Mark 1:14-15 Christ inaugurated His ministry when He began preaching in Galilee. Mark says,

Mark 1:14-15 "Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, [have conviction] and believe in the gospel.""

Today, most mainstream Christians are generally ignorant about what the Kingdom of God really is because what Christ taught is not emphasized. People hear a gospel about Christ, but few hear the gospel of Christ.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ spoke about the Kingdom of God as the "kingdom of heaven"—the kingdom coming from heaven, not in heaven. Those who become humble, teachable peacemakers will inherit the earth.

Matthew 5:3, 5 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven....Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

In the parable of the mustard seed recorded in Matthew 13, Christ taught us that the Kingdom would begin small and will grow large. Christ's earthly ministry had the humblest beginning—His return to earth with millions of angels will be awesome.

In the parable of the pounds recorded in Luke 19, Christ taught that our performance in this lifetime determines how we will be rewarded with a measure of rule in God's Kingdom:

Luke 19:17 And he said to him, 'Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities.'

Mark recorded in Mark 10 that Jesus taught that: the humble, obedient and teachable disposition of a little child is a model for those who expect to inherit God's Kingdom.

In Luke 17:21, while talking to a group of Pharisees, Jesus announced that, "the kingdom of God is within [more properly, "among"] you." Christ was the embodiment of that Kingdom through His teaching and His works. He never missed an opportunity to talk about it.

When Pilate asked Jesus who and what He represented, John 18:36 records that Christ replied, "My kingdom is not of this world." "World" comes from the Greek word kosmos, which means "society." Christ didn't deny He had a kingdom, but that Kingdom was not part of this world's system of government. In the same verse Christ also said that His Kingdom was "not from here—it was not of or for that time.

The chief priests used this situation to make it appear that Christ wanted to usurp Caesar as

ruler. John 19: 15 records that they shouted, "We have no king but Caesar!"

Christ could have saved His life simply by clearing up any misunderstanding—*if* there was a question about what He meant by the word king. But He didn't because He was a king in the purest form.

To placate the mob, Pilate pronounced the death sentence on Christ. The trumped-up charge was: For claiming to be King of the coming Kingdom of God! It was inscribed over Christ's head as He was crucified: "JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS." It was of the Jews because Christ came from Judah.

At His trial Christ also addressed all Christians: "Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice" (John 18: 37). So a person cannot be a true Christian martyr and a true Christian witness without that truth.

Jesus Christ is the King of the government that is coming to replace this world's governments. It will be a real government, not what is often portrayed as a church coexisting along side civil authority. Neither is it a "feeling" within you. Nor is it some faraway place in heaven. Christ lived and died for His Kingdom!

As begotten children of God, destined to be kings and priests in His Kingdom, are we willing to die, if need be, for that same Kingdom?

Christ spent 40 days on earth after His resurrection.

Acts 1:1-3 The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.

[This is the only place in the New Testament where the length of Jesus' post-resurrection ministry is mentioned.]

During this time, He taught His followers about things related to the kingdom of God. Jesus' teaching during the 40 days dealt in essence with three things:

1. The validation and nature of His messiahship and Kingdom.
2. The interpretation of the Old Testament from the perspective of His resurrection.
3. The responsibility of His disciples to bear witness to what had happened among them in fulfillment of Israel's hope.

This is what Luke 24: 25-27, 44-49 reveals as the content of Jesus' post-resurrection teaching, and this is what Luke elaborates on in the book of Acts.

Acts 1: 4 And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, "which," He said,

"you have heard from Me;

The rendering of "being assembled together" here has often been conjectured, but remains unproven. The original Greek means "while eating together with someone." Luke speaks of Jesus eating together with His disciples during these forty days. That is mentioned in Luke 24: 42-43 and also Acts 10: 41.

Acts 1:5-7 for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" And He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority."

Jesus' answer here stresses to His disciples that they must leave to God the matters that are His concerns and take up the things that are entrusted to them. This is a matter of faith.

Acts 1:8 But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

The concept of "witness" is so prominent in Acts (the word in its various forms appears 39 times) that everything else in the book of Acts should be seen in association with it. This mandate to witness comes as a direct commission from Jesus Christ Himself. In fact, to witness comes as His last words before His ascension and, therefore, is final and conclusive.

All that follows in Acts is the result of Jesus' own intent and the fulfillment of His express word. This commission directs all Christians and comes to us as a gift with a promise. It involves 3 things:

1. The person of Jesus, on Whose authority the church acts and Who is the object of its witness;
2. The power of the Holy Spirit, that is, the dynamism for the mission;
3. A plan that begins in Jerusalem, moves out to "all Judea and Samaria," and extends "to the ends of the earth."

The true Christian church, according to Acts, is a church that:

- responds obediently to Jesus' commission,
- acts on Jesus' behalf in extension of His ministry,
- focuses its proclamation of the coming Kingdom of God in its witness of Jesus,
- is guided and empowered by the self-same Spirit that directed Jesus' ministry,

— follows a plan whose guidelines for witnessing have been set by Jesus Himself.

We can be transformed without the benefit of persecution!

I Corinthians 9:24-27 Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.

How much effort do we give to obedience to God, in coming to Sabbath services to genuinely worship Him from the heart? How often do we miss services?

I Corinthians 9:25-27 And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

We can be transformed by training like an athlete for the prize; practice self-discipline; repent; fast; in humility prefer others; pray constantly. But with no outside pressure to follow this rigorous path, we can find ourselves distracted by dozens of other things. We all suffer from this.

A major difference between worldly martyrs and true Christian martyrs is that Christian martyrs lose their lives for the sake of God's truth, for God's way of life—a way of life that glorifies God—a way of life that prepares us for the kingdom of God.

Martyrs for Christ have a special place in Christ, because it is the ultimate evidence of their love for Christ. These martyrs are highlighted in the book of Revelation, where their sacrificial witness receives special honor.

Revelation 12:10-11 Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, "Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.

Verse 11 is both a statement and an appeal. It announces that the followers of the Lamb also become victors over the dragon because they participate in the blood of the Lamb, the weapon that defeated Satan, and because they have confirmed their loyalty to the Lamb by their witness—even to death.

Rather than signaling the triumph of Satan, the blood of the martyrs shows instead that they have gained the victory over the dragon by their acceptance of Jesus and their obedient suffering with Him.

Verses 12 and 17 of Revelation 12 lead to the conclusion that only some of the martyrs are in view. This hymn of victory also becomes an appeal to the rest of the saints to do likewise and confirm their testimony to Christ even if doing so means death.

Christian martyrdom is a positive experience for the true Christian. The faith required of the true Christian martyr is manifested in a very open way, unlike any other experience. What a wonderful example to others in God's church. What a fantastic witness to the world of the glory of God. The reason true Christian martyrs are actually blessed in their physical end is because they are spiritual conquerors and cannot be separated from their God!

Romans 8:31-39 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

As we prepare for and approach this Passover, we can remember that Jesus Christ is the epitome of the righteous and true martyr. That we should live our lives in a way that imitates Him so that we too can glorify God.