

A couple of years ago, the (so-called) Islamic State, (aka: IS / ISIS / ISIL ) , well, they swept through Syria and Iraq, and they murdered anyone who wouldn't join their cause, but especially it was Christians who suffered.

At the moment, Islam, is the fastest growing religion in the world, and there's a number of reasons for that: Firstly, there's demographic reasons – Islamic countries have a lot of people who are in the younger age groups, **and** they have a higher birth-rate...

But there's also, more sinister reasons for its growth:

- Muslims are not allowed to ever leave the Islamic faith. If they do, under Sharia Law (Islamic law), the penalty is “death”... And so Muslims are very reluctant to leave the Islamic faith, because it's very dangerous for them to do so,,,

But the other (even **more** sinister) reason, why people convert to Islam, is because they're given either 2 or 3 choices (usually only 2 choices; occasionally a 3<sup>rd</sup>): When militant Muslim organisations like Boko Haran; IS; Taliban come in to a Christian village, the Christians are given either 2 choices:

1. The first choice, is to convert to Islam, and that's a very easy thing to do. To convert to Islam, all anyone has to do, is recite the Islamic creed: And I think you're supposed to say it in Arabic, but basically it means, *“There is no true god but Allah, and Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah.”*

And anyone who recites that (Of course), are renouncing

Jesus, and they're renouncing their Christian faith.

2. But there's a fair bit of pressure for them to do that, because the **second** choice they're given, is to continue to believe in Jesus, and they and their family will be executed...

A common thing that IS would do, is line up all the Christians, and if the parents refused to renounce Jesus, and become a Muslim, one by one, they'd hack the heads from their children... And then finally, they'd do the same to the parents...

Or, sometimes they'd do it the other way around – If the parents refuse to renounce Jesus, they just kill the parents, and take the children (slaves; child soldiers; raise as Muslims)

3. Occasionally, a 3<sup>rd</sup> option is given – To become a Dhimmi – basically a 2<sup>nd</sup> class citizen... you're taxed higher; you don't get all the same rights and privileges as a Muslim does; and sometimes you're almost a slave...

But usually, it's just the 2 options – renounce Jesus and become a Muslim, or you and your family will be brutally hacked to death... It's not any wonder that Islam is growing – there isn't much of a choice – people are being **forced** to convert...

But Disciples of Jesus, who have a true, living faith, even though they are threatened, they **refuse** to renounce Jesus, and they **refuse** to convert to Islam, and they **are** killed, and their families are killed...

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For us (living here in Australia) – we don't know what it's like to really be persecuted... I mean, don't get me wrong:

- Following Jesus is not easy;
- Being obedient to Jesus won't make us popular;
- In many ways, we'll be rejected;
- Excluded; and
- Belittled...
  
- **And** religious persecution is increasing in Australia, particularly if we dare to speak God's truth to a world who don't want to hear it
  
- We live in a country where people believe it's their right, to not be offended. And the Gospel message **is** very offensive. It tells us:
  - we are all sinners, and
  - we need to repent of our sin
  - we need to make Jesus our Lord, instead of us being our own lord...

And that message, is offensive.

*And we now have laws in our country, to punish anyone who gives offence. And over the last year, we've seen Christians lose their jobs; lose their businesses; face ridicule in the media, because they've dared to preach*

*the gospel and in doing so, they've offended people and a few special interest groups...*

But even so, we are yet to experience the sort of persecution that Christians in other countries **do** experience... But I have no doubt, that as we get closer to the time of the return of Jesus, persecutions are going to increase (even here.)...

*Now, I'm constantly amazed, at God's timing... We're just working our way through the Gospel of Mark, and where we're up to today, just happens to be about standing strong for Jesus, in the face of persecution,, **And** it just so happens that **today**, Ting Ting has shared with us, what it's like being a Christian in China...*

And for people like Ting Ting and for the church in China, and the persecuted church in places like:

- North Korea;
- Afghanistan;
- Somalia;
- Libya;
- Pakistan;
- Sudan;
- Eritrea;
- Yemen;
- Iran;
- India...

According to the Open Doors World Watch List, that's the 10 worst places for Christian persecution in the world at the moment... (China #27).

But, for the 1 in 9 Christians, who **are** suffering persecution, a large part of the New Testament, really comes alive for them, in a way that it mightn't for us. And the reason it really comes alive for them, is because it's written for the persecuted church... Much of the early church, were being persecuted, and **many** of the New Testament letters were written, to help the persecuted church, to endure.

For us, it might all seem a bit 'academic' – it's all stuff we take note of, and learn, and know in our head,,,,, But for those who are being persecuted (right now), These Scriptures come alive...

Now, as we've worked our way through various books of the Bible, **often**, I've said, “This was written to disciples of Jesus who were being persecuted”...

Time after time:

- We've been urged to keep on following Jesus;
- To remain faithful;
- To endure;
- To overcome...

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A good example of this:

It's a couple of years ago now, but as we studied the Book of the Revelation, we heard over and over, about “He who **conquers**” or “the one who **overcomes**”... And throughout that book, it becomes evident, that the overcomers are those

who keep the commandments of God, and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And even martyrs (or especially martyrs) are overcomers – they're conquerors, because they **have kept the commandments of God, and held to the testimony of Jesus** (no matter what).

Alright, so when we study the Scriptures, we **learn** this; We **know** this...

But how can we know, if **we** will be overcomers?

How can I know, if:

- When the chips are down, will **I** be someone who stands strong for Jesus?
- When my life, or the lives of my family are at risk, **Will I** be faithful?
- Or will I be weak?

You see, for us now, it's quite easy for us to say that I love Jesus. It's quite easy to say "I will be faithful to the end"...  
But **will** I???

I mean look at the Bible reading of today...,, And all of the promises of loyalty that Jesus' disciples made...

Jesus said, "...**You will all fall away, for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'**....

But:

<sup>29</sup> Peter said to him, "Even though they all fall away, I will not." <sup>30</sup> And Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." <sup>31</sup> But he said emphatically, "If I must die with you, I will not deny you." And they all said the same.

But how did that pan out??? They couldn't even stay awake for Him... They went into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, and all Jesus asked of them, was for them to stay awake and keep watch, but they couldn't even do that...

And He said to them: <sup>38</sup> Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.

– what was the temptation??? To fall asleep? - that's a minor part – the temptation was:

- for them to fall away;
- deny Jesus, and
- to flee, to save their own skin...

**That** was their temptation, and they needed to pray that they wouldn't succumb to it...

But Jesus knew that they would. It had been prophesied. And He said: **The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."**

Alright, they wanted to stand firm, but their flesh was weak – they couldn't do it...

And when Jesus was arrested, one of them tried to fight with the sword, but that wasn't going to be Jesus' way, and in the end, V<sup>50</sup> **And they all left him and fled.**

BTW, there's an interesting little footnote there, about one of them who lost his clothes in his zeal to get away... It might've been one of the 12; It might've been **another** follower who was lingering nearby;... There has been speculation that it might've been Mark Himself, who was there, we don't know... But the point is, **everybody** left... Everybody fled...

Why would we be any different???

The reason they left (you see), is because even though the Spirit was willing the flesh was weak... At this point, their human weakness overrode the desires of the Spirit... But about 50 days later, something significant changed in those Disciples. And for us to know what changed, we've got to go to the book of Acts.

In Acts 1, Jesus has risen, and yet, we find the disciples hiding away behind closed doors... Over about 40 days, the Risen Lord Jesus, had appeared to them at various times...

And one time, while Jesus was eating with them, He: Acts  
1:4 ... ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem,  
but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he  
said, **"you heard from me; <sup>5</sup> for John baptised with**



**water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."**

And then, just before Jesus ascended into Heaven, He said to them: **<sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."**

And then in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost, and Peter, who had been so weak, and who had fled, well, Peter's the one who stands up and preaches... Not afraid anymore; Not cowering; Not hiding away...; Not running for his life; and **definitely** not denying Jesus...

What was the change? The Holy Spirit changed them... When the Holy Spirit came in power, that's what gave them the strength, to stand firm for Jesus...

And over the years, almost all of those disciples who had fled to save their own skin, were executed rather than deny Jesus again...

So, lets come back to **our** pondering of whether **we** will stand strong...

When the chips are down, and we're under the pressure of persecution to deny Jesus, will we be strong enough to stand strong for Jesus and never deny Jesus??? No, in ourselves, we don't have that strength...

But praise to the Lord our God, His Holy Spirit, **does** give us the strength to stand strong...

This is the promise of Jesus... He returned to the Father, so that His disciples (you and I), can have the Holy Spirit of God living inside of us,, And **right there**, is the strength we need, to honour Jesus to the very end... The Holy Spirit will never deny Jesus, and being filled with the Spirit, means neither will we...

Do you remember, we talked about this back in **Mark 13:9** "**But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. <sup>10</sup> And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. <sup>11</sup> And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.**

**<sup>12</sup> And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. <sup>13</sup> And you will**

**be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.**

How do we endure? We keep the commandments of God, and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

How do we manage that??? By the power of the Holy Spirit...

You see, God doesn't give us the ability to 'save our own skin'... But He does give us the words and the power, to be **witnesses** for Jesus, no matter what...

Now, if there's one thing that I need to learn from today, and if there's one thing that you need to learn from today, it's this:  
When persecutions come, **by faith**, the Holy Spirit gives us strength, to be His witnesses, and to endure to the end...

We shouldn't be worrying, “Am I strong enough?” “Will I be strong enough?” Because we know that the Holy Spirit – He's the one who **is** strong enough, and He's the one who **will** help us to endure...

We need to stop worrying, if we're going to be strong enough, and just start living for Jesus ( no matter what the cost ), because God's got that part under control...

Being filled with the Holy Spirit, means “not falling away”, is more than wishful thinking – it's a certainty in Christ.

Let's pray,

*Lord God, we want to thank You for our Lord Jesus Christ  
who saved us,  
And we thank you for Your Holy Spirit, Who empowers us...*

*Lord, today we want to give thanks for all of your faithful  
witnesses,  
(from those first disciples, to the early church, to missionaries  
throughout the ages, to those martyrs who will die for You  
(rather than deny their saviour), this very day.)*

*Lord, we want to thank you, that in our weakness, you make us  
strong.*

*We want to thank you, that as persecutions increase,  
The strength of your Holy Spirit, will enable us to endure...*

*Lord, we pray for our Brothers and Sisters in Christ,  
Who this very day, are suffering for Your sake.*

*Lord, keep them strong...*

*We're not going to pray that you will keep them safe,  
But we **will** pray, that You will give them the strength of Your  
Spirit,  
That they may endure.*

*Lord, may they be Your witnesses;  
And may **we** be Your witnesses...  
To a world who sorely needs a Saviour.*

*In Jesus' Name,  
Amen.*