

# “But If Not”

Mark 6:14-29, 13:5-11 <sup>1</sup>

*“Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’  
No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. **Father, glorify your name!**”* (John 12:27-28).

One of the things I did on my recent trip to central Kentucky was to tour the Toyota Assembly Plant in Georgetown. The largest of Toyota’s assembly plants, Georgetown is the place where Toyota builds Camry’s, Avalon’s, and the Lexus ES 350—550,000 cars a year.

The plant operates with Toyota’s “just in time” production, a strategy that increases efficiency and reduces waste by receiving materials only when they are needed in the production process, thereby reducing inventory costs considerably. As we toured the plant, driverless vehicles scurried about delivering parts to the assembly line just minutes before they became part of a new car. And the truth is that God usually works like that, too.

Oxford professor John Lennox was impressed by God’s “just in time action” as he interviewed Viktor, a Russian man who had spent years in a Siberian labor camp for the awful crime of teaching his children about Jesus. Here are some of his observations about that interview:

Viktor “described to me things that no person should ever have to witness or to experience. I listened, thinking how little I really knew about life, and wondering how I would have fared under those circumstances. As though he read my thoughts, he suddenly said, ‘You couldn’t cope with that, could you?’

“Embarrassed, I mumbled something like, ‘No, I’m sure you’re right.’

“He smiled and said, ‘Nor could I! I was a man who fainted at the sight of his own blood, let alone that of others. But what I discovered in the camp was this: **God does not help us to face theoretical situations. God helps us to face real situations.** Like you, I couldn’t imagine how one could cope in the Gulag. But once I was there, I found that God met me there, exactly as Jesus had promised His disciples when He was preparing them for persecution.’

And Lennox added, “We can be confident that God will grant us grace sufficient to handle whatever comes our way, when it comes our way, and perhaps *not a moment before!*”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus made this point to His disciples when He told them, “**Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit**” (Mark 13:11).

Our focus this morning is on that “Pentecost Promise” of the Holy Spirit and on what that looks like in real life; but before we consider recent examples, I’d like to take you back in time and across the world to Babylon, just outside modern Baghdad, about the year 550 B. C.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on May 28, 2017, Memorial Day. Parallel passages are Matthew 14:1-12 and Luke 9:7-9.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke. Digital Version.

<sup>2</sup> John C. Lennox, *Against the Flow: The Inspiration of Daniel in an Age of Relativism* (Oxford: Monarch, 2015), p. 147.

Nebuchadnezzar, the ruler of Babylon, has had a huge golden statue made of himself—ninety feet tall and nine feet wide—and he has commanded his subjects to bow down and worship him before the statue. (Saddam Hussein liked to think of himself as a modern Nebuchadnezzar.)

Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, have refused to bow down, even with the King's threat of throwing them into a "fiery furnace": "*King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. **But even if he does not**, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up*" (Daniel 3:16-18).

That bold statement is a statement of "just in time" faith: "God is able to save us, and we expect that He will save us, even at the last moment. **But if not**, we will be faithful, nonetheless." Jesus said essentially the same thing in the Garden of Gethsemane: "*Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; **yet not my will, but yours be done***" (Luke 22:42).

And Jesus had earlier expressed this same commitment in what for me is an even more memorable way: "*Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. **Father, glorify your name!***" (John 12:27-28).

Now it is not wrong to ask God to protect us from persecution, physical harm, and death. Jesus asked for that, too. But the "bottom line," as Viktor, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and our Lord Jesus, demonstrate, is a commitment to be faithful to God *no matter what*, trusting that God will give us the strength we need, "just in time," and that God's Kingdom will be advanced, even if through our pain.<sup>3</sup>

And with all this as background, we come to that event which is really the background for our meditation this morning, the execution of John the Baptist in the sixth chapter of Mark. You may remember that when we were last in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus had sent the Twelve out two by two to preach throughout Galilee.<sup>4</sup> Between that sending out and their later reporting on their mission, Mark gives an account of the death of John the Baptist, implicitly pointing out that being a witness for Jesus is often costly—sometimes *very* costly.<sup>5</sup>

Now if we were doing a Bible study on this passage, I might point out the interesting parallels between the ministries of John and Jesus. I might point out the many similarities between Herod and Pilate as they faced John and Jesus. And I might point out the similarities between Herod's wife, Herodias, and Ahab's wife, Jezebel. But that's not how I want to spend these few minutes this morning. John's faithfulness unto death is simply the inspiration for a larger consideration of suffering for Jesus' sake.

You may know that we are now in the Muslim holy season of Ramadan, a season in which many Christians around the world pray for the salvation of Muslims. And nearly every day, we are reminded that Islamic countries tend to be, at least in our time, the places where Christians are most severely persecuted. You can see this from the background of today's *PowerPoint*.

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<sup>3</sup> I think it was Kierkegaard who said, "When a tyrant dies, his influence ends. When a martyr dies, his influence begins." And long before Kierkegaard, Tertullian had noted that "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

<sup>4</sup> Mark 6:6b-13, 30-31

<sup>5</sup> Jesus warned His disciples of this fact many times: "*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you*" (Matthew 5:11-12).

Shia and Sunni Muslims are no friends to each other, often killing each other for no other reason than membership in the other group. And Christians are persecuted and killed, probably every day, just because they follow Jesus and not Muhammed.<sup>6</sup>

**Bagus** was a Muslim who came to know Jesus in 2014 and was baptized in 2015. A “trash picker” before his conversion, Bagus is still a trash picker today; but he is also the leader of a house church with a number of former Muslims in his village.

When a villager saw Bagus sharing Jesus with a neighbor, the villager reported him to the authorities, who dragged him and the members of his house church outside the village and threatened to kill them unless they converted to Islam. Bagus refused; and although he was not killed—at least not yet—he is forced to live apart from his family. “Even so,” Bagus said forcefully, “I’ve never regretted my decision to follow Jesus. I’m following Him wholeheartedly.”<sup>7</sup>

**Hassan John** is a Christian pastor in Jos, Nigeria. Regarded as an “infidel” by Boko Haram, with a price on his head, Hassan goes to his church every day knowing that he may be killed by someone who wants to claim that reward.

Hassan is fifty-two years old and lives amid the awful violence and bloodshed of northeast Nigeria. He has seen friends shot before his eyes, and he has narrowly escaped death himself, but this violence and hatred have not stopped him from reaching out to his Muslim neighbors who need to know Jesus.

His evangelistic outreach involves eating meals with Muslims, which is a much bigger thing than you might imagine. “In Nigeria,” Hassan notes, “you don’t eat with your enemy, because you are afraid that you might be poisoned. But we do this anyway in an effort to build friendships and bring people to Jesus. *It is just so marvelous.*”<sup>8</sup>

I’m sure you know that such danger is not limited to Muslim lands. New believers in a predominantly Hindu nation in South Asia are asked several questions before their baptism:

1. Are you willing to leave home and to lose the blessing of your father?
2. Are you willing to lose your job?
3. Are you willing to give an offering of suffering to the Lord?
4. Are you willing to go to those who persecute you, forgive them, and share the love of Jesus with them?
5. Are you willing to be beaten rather than to deny your faith?
6. Are you willing to go to prison?
7. **Are you willing to die for Jesus?**<sup>9</sup>

My friend, Nik Ripken, author of *The Insanity of God*,<sup>10</sup> has noted that “When we ask, ‘Why do 80% of global followers of Jesus who actively practice their faith live in environments where persecution is the norm?’ the first and most basic answer is that they have given their lives to Jesus. The second contributing factor is that they have determined in their hearts that they will

<sup>6</sup> Lest we think too highly of ourselves, we need to remember the many, many divisions in Christendom and our own bloody history.

<sup>7</sup> “Led to Christ to Lead Others,” *Open Doors Asia* (4.7.16).

<sup>8</sup> Clement Ejiofor, “Boko Haram Placed a Bounty on Christian Pastor from Jos,” [www.Naij.com](http://www.Naij.com) (12.3.15).

<sup>9</sup> “South Asian Nation Struggles to Shape Itself,” *Mission Network News*, 1.17.12, 9.19.13.

<sup>10</sup> Nik Ripken, *The Insanity of God: A True Story of Faith Resurrected* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2013).

not keep Jesus to themselves. Once finding faith in Christ, they have a passion to share the Good News of His sacrificial love and forgiveness with their family, friends, and neighbors.

“This means that for most believers, **persecution is often completely avoidable**. Leave Jesus alone, don’t seek or follow Him, and you will avoid the number one cause of religious persecution in the world today. And even if you do become a believer in Christ, just keep your faith private and personal, and your chance of being persecuted for your new faith is practically nonexistent. Just leave Him alone. Just keep Him to yourself. Persecution dies where there is no faith or witness.

“If that’s true,” Nik asked, “why are so many believers persecuted in so many oppressive countries all over the world? The Believers in Persecution whom Ruth and I have met understand, and have taught us, an important truth: that the freedom to believe and witness has little or nothing to do with whatever government or political system they live under, or what inalienable, civil, or human rights they might enjoy.

“Indeed, one of the most important lessons I’ve learned from fellow believers in persecution is this: They (and we with them) are just as free to share Jesus today in their countries of Somalia, Pakistan, or China as we are in the USA, Canada, Sweden or any other democratic western nation. **The issue is not one of political freedom. The issue is one of obedience.**”

Imagine Dr. King giving speeches filled with gentle hints about the evils of segregation, because he feared pushing too hard. Imagine Rosa Parks submitting to the bus driver’s command to give up her seat. Imagine Nelson Mandela looking the other way with respect to apartheid because he didn’t want to make a fuss. Imagine Malala Yousafzai passively quitting school because she was too frightened by the death threats she received from Taliban extremists, who abhor education for girls.

And imagine yourself, fully aware of the mission and vision God has placed in your heart to advance His kingdom in this world in this generation, yet held hostage by fear and excuses. My friends, if you and I don’t fulfill the mission God assigned to us, *who will?*<sup>11</sup>

As you know, I wrote letters to two Coptic Orthodox Pastors, one here in Laurel, and one near our home in Virginia, expressing grief and prayerful support for the Coptic Christian community after the massacre of Coptic Christians in Egypt a week ago. Both pastors responded with gratitude, and the one in Virginia wrote, “*We have this mixed feeling of being joyful dying for Christ and sadness for the degradation of the state of humanity. Please pray for those who lost loved ones to always be strengthened in faith.*”

Here’s another, unusual illustration of what happens when God’s people are obedient, when we pray, not “Save Me!” but “Father, glorify Your Name.” You probably know that ordinary carbon, when subjected to enormous heat and pressure deep in the earth, is sometimes transformed into diamond. And you know that a polished diamond is beautiful because of the marvelous way in which it reflects light.

That in itself is a beautiful statement about Christians, about the value of suffering for Jesus, and about how we reflect the Light of God’s Love, but there’s another example perhaps even more powerful. Ordinary clay, when compressed to a certain point, becomes slate. With even more pressure, it can become garnet, a semi-precious gem. But with extreme pressure,

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<sup>11</sup> Adapted from Bill Hybels, *Simplify* (Tyndale, 2014), pp. 148-149.

ordinary clay becomes staurolite, frequently in the shape of a “stone cross,” reminding us of God’s Love at the center of all things.<sup>12</sup>

My friends, like Viktor, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, like John the Baptist, like Bagus, like Hassan John, like these Coptic Christians, and like our Lord Jesus Himself, we, too, can pray, “Not my will, but Yours be done.” We can pray, “Father, glorify Your Name.”

We can expect God to provide what is necessary in order for us to glorify Him “just in time,” recognizing that sometimes, what we need is the ability to give our very lives for Him. And in those “But If Not” moments, we can remember that He told us, “*If you remain faithful even when facing death, I will give you the crown of life*” (Revelation 2:10).

Karen Watson, a Baptist missionary to Iraq, was one of three missionaries gunned down in Mosul on March 15, 2004. These words are from a letter she left behind when she left home for Mosul:

*Care more than some think is wise.  
Risk more than some think is safe.  
Dream more than some think is practical.  
Expect more than some think is possible.*

*We are called not to comfort or success but to obedience.  
There is no joy outside of knowing Jesus and serving Him.*

Once to ev’ry man and nation  
Comes the moment to decide,  
In the strife of truth with falsehood,  
For the good or evil side;  
Some great cause, some great decision,  
Off’ring each the bloom or blight,  
And the choice goes by forever  
’Twixt that darkness and that light.

Though the cause of evil prosper,  
Yet the truth alone is strong;  
Though her portion be the scaffold,  
And upon the throne be wrong:  
Yet that scaffold sways the future,  
And, behind the dim unknown,  
Standeth God within the shadow,  
Keeping watch above his own.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Adapted from “Dr. James Clark Speaks on Metamorphic Rocks,” *YouTube*, 12.2.10.  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Staurolite>; <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diamond>

<sup>13</sup> James Russell Lowell, “Once to Ev’ry Man and Nation,” *Boston Courier*, December 11, 1845.