

“To Die For”

Daniel 6:1-28 ¹

Although the historical records are not altogether clear, it appears that what we call “Memorial Day” has been observed off and on in some form since May 30, 1868, just after our Civil War. The purpose of the remembrance is to express our gratitude for those who have given the ultimate sacrifice in the service of our country. As we sometimes put it, “All gave some; some gave all.”

The idea of Memorial Day includes all of our nation’s armed conflicts, and, while Ted Tull may be our only decorated war hero, all who served are heroes in their own right. And the heroes are not limited to those in uniform. One of our members in Bristol risked her life as a member of the French Underground, spending the last days of the war as a prisoner in the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau.²

Some of us may have fought in Korea; some in Viet Nam; some fought in Iraq, some fought in Afghanistan, and some of us currently serve. The point of Memorial Day is that it really does happen that ordinary people sometimes do extraordinary things . . . and some die doing them. As a yard sign sometimes puts it, “If you can read this, thank a teacher. If you can read it in English, thank a soldier.”

Stephen Ambrose is perhaps the foremost military historian of our time. In an interview with *The Atlantic*, Ambrose was asked what drew him to become a military historian, even though he had never fought in a war himself. He replied, “I decided early on that I wanted to be a historian, and then I very quickly figured out that war is where the action is, and even more specifically, that the action’s on the battlefield, where who wins determines the kind of world we’re going to live in. I thought, I want to go to the heart of the matter.”³

One of his statements is especially important: **“The action’s on the battlefield, where who wins determines the kind of world we’re going to live in.”** We’ll return to that.

As you can see, I’ve titled this message “To Die For.” Our culture has absolutely destroyed the significance of these three words, frequently using them for things no more significant than describing a good chocolate sundae. I urge you to take these words out of your vocabulary unless you’re using them in the way they’re intended. These are sacred words that refer to the sacrifice of one’s own lifeblood in ultimate commitment to the kind of world we’re going to live in.

In our text on this Memorial Day weekend, the prophet Daniel was in his eighties. A Jewish expatriate to Babylon since he was a young man, he had risen over the years to become one of the three most powerful men in the Empire after the king himself. And as still happens today, when it became known that the king intended to make Daniel the chief administrator over the entire Empire, “*the other administrators and high officers began searching for some fault in the way Daniel was handling government affairs, but they couldn’t find anything to criticize or condemn. He was faithful, always responsible, and completely trustworthy. So they concluded, ‘Our only chance of finding grounds for accusing Daniel will be in connection with the rules of his religion’*” (Daniel 6:4-5).

You know the story, and there are two main things I want to highlight in it. First of all, if Daniel’s faith and his personal relationship with God had been as empty as the vague

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on 5.24.20, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

² Her name was Yvette Perdue.

³ <http://worldwar2history.info/Band-of-Brothers/ambrose.html>

“spirituality” that tries to pass for faith these days, it would not have provided the opportunity his enemies sought. Daniel’s faith was real, clear, vital, and non-negotiable.

Second, Daniel’s enemies were confident that their trap would work because they knew that Daniel, unlike themselves, was a man of integrity. So, when Daniel heard about the new law forbidding prayer “*to anyone, human or divine*” other than the king, he knew that it was directed against him. And without any hesitation, he did what he had always done—he got on his knees. The stakes were high—this was a matter of life and death—but Daniel was not a man to lower his flag when trouble threatened. Daniel’s faith in God was **something to die for**.

Now fast forward some 550 years and hear Peter as he boldly speaks of Jesus when on trial before the Jewish High Council: ¹² *There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.*”

¹³ *The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men with no special training in the Scriptures. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus. . . .*

¹⁶ *“What should we do with these men?” they asked each other. “We can’t deny that they have performed a miraculous sign, and everybody in Jerusalem knows about it. ¹⁷ But to keep them from spreading their propaganda any further, we must warn them not to speak to anyone in Jesus’ name again.” ¹⁸ So they called the apostles back in and commanded them never again to speak or teach in the name of Jesus.*

¹⁹ *But Peter and John replied, “Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him? ²⁰ We cannot stop telling about everything we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:12-20). For Peter and John, too, their love for Jesus was **something to die for**.*

Though they were spared that day, Peter and John later paid dearly for their bold refusal to stop telling others about Jesus. They lived, and preached, and died remembering the words of the Master: ¹¹ *“God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. ¹² Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way (Matthew 5:10-12).*

Like Daniel and Peter and John, thousands of other followers of Jesus across the centuries have regarded their faith in and their personal relationship with Jesus as **something to die for**. There are many chronicles of these martyrs,⁴ and we don’t have to look far for their successors. The best real-time source for such information is *The Voice of the Martyrs*, whose web addresses are on your screen.⁵ Let me tell you about some current events that have to do with faith **to die for** in our world today:

In the last week of March, during COVID, Christians in Nigeria reported multiple attacks by both Boko Haram terrorists and Fulani Islamic militants in the north. On March 26, Fulani Islamic militants attacked the Christian village of Miango, killing three villagers, injuring several others and burning Christians’ houses. The next day, Boko Haram kidnapped three Christian

⁴ See John Foxe, *The Book of Martyrs* (England: John Day, 1563); Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ* (Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Book Company, 1967); movie *The End of the Spear* (2006); John Foxe and The Voice of the Martyrs, *Foxe: Voices of the Martyrs* (Alachua, FL: Bridge-Logos, 2007), printed in China for export only (!).

⁵ www.persecution.net; www.persecution.com.

students who were returning home after taking university entrance exams. And on March 30, Fulani Islamic militants killed two Christian men in Dangwa village.⁶

Also this spring, an Iraqi Christian was killed because of his faith. He was apparently murdered by family members who were angry that he had shared the gospel with an elderly parent who was about to die.⁷

Those of you who have read or seen *The Insanity of God*,⁸ the story of my friend, Nik Ripken's ministry with persecuted Christians around the world, will remember that while Nik worked in Somalia during the awful civil war of the early 1990's, the Somalis murdered every known Somali Christian. As is often the case, persecution led to increasing numbers of Christians, and this spring several Somali Islamic leaders publicly encouraged the killing of Somali Christians. At least one murder has already occurred.⁹

Just a few weeks ago, a woman was dismissed from her job as a teacher at a Russian university after school officials learned of her Christian faith. A single mother who is raising her children without family support, Vera had hoped that her part-time job teaching Russian would eventually develop into a full-time position. She was told to either give up her church membership or resign, so she chose to leave her job.¹⁰

At the beginning of this year, prior to COVID, three Christian families from the Akha tribe in Laos were expelled from their village after refusing to renounce their faith in Christ. Village authorities accused the believers of abandoning Akha customs and told them that if they would not renounce their "Jesus religion" they would have to leave the village.

The Christians told them they would not renounce their faith in Christ, pointing out they had not broken any laws and wanted to stay in the village. After that, village leaders loaded the believers and their belongings onto a truck, drove them to some empty farmland outside the village, and left them there. The authorities then destroyed the families' homes in the village.¹¹

As a final example, the father-in-law of one of my friends served with his wife and family as a missionary in a Communist-dominated part of South America. On one occasion, the Communists sent word to him that if he entered a particular area again to preach the Gospel, they would kill him. He went anyway, because for him, his faith was **something to die for**. God honored his courage and effort, and his preaching led many to faith in Jesus.

Years later, my friend's father-in-law was approached by a man after a religious meeting who asked, "Do you remember the time when the Communists told you not to come into this area or you would be killed?" The missionary most certainly did remember.

The man continued, "I was one of the guerrillas stationed at the bridge to kill you. I've since become a follower of Jesus, and there is a question I've wanted to ask you for years: Where did you get all the soldiers who accompanied you?"

⁶ <https://www.icommittopray.com/request/2030/attacked-christians/>

⁷ <https://www.icommittopray.com/request/2025/brother-of-murdered-christian/>

⁸ https://smile.amazon.com/Insanity-God-Story-Faith-Resurrected/dp/1433673088/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=1589987975&sr=8-1

⁹ <https://www.icommittopray.com/request/2029/somali-christians/>

¹⁰ <https://www.icommittopray.com/request/2028/vera/>

¹¹ <https://www.icommittopray.com/request/2027/exiled-families/>

My friend's father-in-law replied quietly, "**There were no soldiers. If you saw soldiers, then they were angels.**"

Beloved, it is still true on this Memorial Day weekend during COVID that the faith to which Jesus calls us is **something to die for**. Jesus tells us, even now, "*If you want to be my follower you must love me more than your own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, more than your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple. . . . Don't begin until you count the cost. . . . **No one can become my disciple without giving up everything for me**" (Luke 14:26, 28, 33).*

Now that sounds hard, and it is hard. Jesus doesn't call us to something easy—following Jesus is **something to die for**—but He does call us to something wonderful: ⁴⁴ "*The Kingdom of Heaven*" He said, "*is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field.*"

⁴⁵ *Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant on the lookout for choice pearls.* ⁴⁶ *When he discovered a pearl of great value, he sold everything he owned and bought it!*" (Matthew 13:44-46). Jesus continues to tell us today that although following Him **costs everything** that we are and have, following Him is also **worth what it costs**.

Given all these things, as you and I consider Memorial Day remembrances this COVID weekend, one of the questions we must face is the question of how far we are willing to go in our commitment to Jesus. Is there a point at which we'll cave in, a price that's too great, a sacrifice that's unacceptable, a point at which we'll abandon Him? And it's at that very point that we need to hear Him ask, "***And how do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose or forfeit your own soul in the process?***" (Luke 9:25).

The truth of the matter is that God's call to a faith "to die for" is also a call to high adventure. Memorial Day remembers battlefields past; Jesus calls us to battlefields present and future. The Bible says, "*We are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against those mighty powers of darkness who rule this world, and against wicked spirits in the heavenly realms*" (Ephesians 6:12).

Stephen Ambrose was right in more ways than one when he said, "**The action is on the battlefield, where who wins determines the kind of world we're going to live in.**" While Jesus' cross and empty tomb represent what we might call the V-E and V-J Days of the Unseen Battle, sealing its outcome, battles still rage and people are still dying. And you and I are called to the field of battle.

Daniel made enemies at work by doing a good job. Perhaps you've had similar experiences. When we do our work well, we often find that coworkers begin looking for ways to tear us down. When that happens, we, like Daniel, should continue to conduct ourselves in ways that are above reproach. While this may not save us from attacks, in the end, we will, like the believers whose stories I've just told, be found faithful as we trust in our God.

It's also worth noting that in Daniel's case, the crucial issue was his devotional life. While you and I may not face persecution or death because of our personal devotions, we are still pretty good at finding reasons to neglect it.

Spending daily time in God's Word and in prayer is *the very best way* to experience peace through COVID and through all the other crises that we face. It never seems to occur to us that our tensions and our fears spring largely out of our lack of quiet worship. We blame our busyness for our neglect of personal worship, but our busyness itself is frequently a result of that neglect.

Martin Luther is supposed to have said that “I have so very much to do that I cannot possibly get along with less than three hours of prayer a day.” That may overstate things a bit, but the point is well taken.

My friends, it is a great mistake to think that we can neglect our time with God and then be ready to meet the crises of life when they come. We cannot give up our personal devotions—our life-giving connection to Him who is our Life—and expect to find ourselves adequate for life.

Remember the crucial point Stephen Ambrose made: **“The action’s on the battlefield, where who wins determines the kind of world we’re going to live in.”** The battles that count in this old world are first won or lost in prayer.

When a ship is at anchor, if the anchor is not secured to rock, it’s possible for the anchor to drag in heavy weather, taking the ship into danger. Our lives are like that, too. If you’re not as close to God today as you once were, make no mistake about who moved.

Fix your anchor to the Rock, my friends. Fix your anchor to the Rock.