

Martyrdom

The English word, “martyr,” comes directly from the Greek word, and when it is found in the Greek, it usually is translated as “witness.” In secular usage Greek speaking people in biblical times would refer to someone who gave evidence in a court room as a martyr. Someone who witnessed the signature of a legal document would be named a martyr. A martyr was normally a person, but sometimes a written historical account could also be called a martyr. A martyr was anyone or anything who witnessed something and could give testimony to others about the authenticity of what they had observed. A martyr was one who knew the truth and testified to that truth. It is appropriate, then, that the Greek word, “martyr,” is translated to the English as “witness.”

While Greek speaking people still use the word, “martyr,” to refer to a witness to the authenticity of an event, the word in English has taken on a very specific meaning. Martyrs are those who have suffered death because they refuse to renounce their faith. Thus, in the common English usage of the word, all Christian martyrs are dead because they remained faithful to Jesus Christ even when they knew they would die for their faithfulness.

From time to time, I have read the stories of martyrs, and I wonder what I would do in a similar situation. If it were demanded of me that I renounce Jesus or be killed, how would I respond? I would hope that I would respond by being faithfully stalwart to the end, and that is certainly a goal I would set for myself, but I don't know if I would be able to reach that goal. We can read many stories of those who died for their faith, but there are also many stories of how now long-forgotten people who renounced Jesus in the face of persecution and did not remain faithful. I would not want to be among them, but I can't make any guarantees that I would not. Perhaps like many of you, I have reflected on how I would respond if it became dangerous to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps there is a way that we can practice becoming a martyr, should that need arise. We reserve the term, “martyr,” for those who have given their life because they would not renounce Jesus, but we can also use the broader sense of the word to think about someone witnessing to the authenticity of Jesus even while they are alive. In the broader sense of the word, a martyr is not only one who dies for Jesus; a martyr can also be one who lives for Jesus. And this, perhaps, is the way we can practice for becoming someone who dies for Jesus.

I suspect that if we would go back into history and examine the lives of those who died for their faith, we would discover that those great heroes of the faith also lived faithfully for Jesus. In other words, they practiced for their martyrdom by being faithful to Jesus when not confronted with their own deaths. It would be harder to study the lives of those who did renounce Jesus in the face of persecution, for their stories are not often told, but I would suspect that we would discover that they denied Jesus when facing death because they were also not faithful to Jesus when living their lives. So, if I really want to know if I would die for Jesus, I must ask myself how willing I am to live for Jesus. Living faithfully for Jesus would make dying for Jesus more likely.

There is another facet to this whole discussion that we must not forget. Often, we make martyrs (those who died for Jesus) into heroes, elevating them above the rest of us. Without a doubt their stories need to be told, but I suspect that most martyrs would not see themselves as heroes. I had lunch with a man once who nearly died for his faith. Living in a place where being a Christian was allowed but witnessing for Jesus was not, this man had been speaking to others about God's grace in Jesus Christ. For his witness, he was arrested and after a short trial, was sentenced to death by having his head chopped off with a sword. On the fateful day, he was taken into the courtyard, and the executioner made himself ready. In the minutes before he was executed, he asked to pray, and he prayed for those who were going to take his life. What happened next, this man does not fully understand, but his execution was delayed, and he was released from prison a few days later. As he told the story, the rest of us were amazed, but he did not see himself as a hero. He was only being faithful, for that was all that was being asked of him.

When he gave his testimony and told his story, what became clear was that he not only was willing to die for Jesus, but he was also eager to live for Jesus. I met this man in seminary, and I know that after his studies he returned to his country, but what happened after that, I do not know. I suspect that he continued to witness to those around him of God's grace in Jesus, and he may have faced the executioner's sword once again. I do not know, but this I do know: for him Jesus was the one who should receive the glory. In his mind, Jesus was the hero, for it was Jesus who had brought salvation to this world by giving his life for us.

I do wonder if I would be a martyr, giving my life for Jesus, or if I would be ranked among the cowards. I also know that my chances of being a martyr increase, not as I fortify myself and make myself strong but as I humbly submit to Jesus Christ and live for him. In living for him, I also can practice for the event of dying for him, if that should come. I imagine that if we live for the Lord, we won't find dying for him such a bit stretch. Living as a martyr (witness) should make it possible for one to die as a martyr. If, however, if we don't live for him, dying for him might well be beyond us should that need ever arise. So, like you, I need to continue to practice for martyrdom, for, while it may never happen, I need to be prepared for it. The only way to prepare is to live humbly and obediently for the Lord Jesus Christ, witnessing to his death for us in our lives so that we can witness to his grace in our deaths.

Pastor Gary