

February 23, 2025 – 1 Corinthians 15:21-26, 30-42

On February 15, 2015, 21 men walked out onto a beach in Libya. They were wearing orange jumpsuits with black sacks on their heads. Around them stood ISIS soldiers carrying AK rifles, except for one, who was recording the proceedings on a camera or phone.

The hooded men were foreign construction workers, most of them from various villages in Egypt. But they were gathered by the terrorists for a different reason this day. For they were also Coptic Christians and the Islamic State could not stand their presence in Libya.

One by one, an ISIS soldier with a large sword walked down the line of men. One by one, the men cried out, “Ya Rabb Yesua!” Oh Lord Jesus! One by one, the ISIS soldier cut off their heads.

Until he reached the last man, where he paused. This man was not a Coptic Egyptian. His name was Matthew Ayariga and he was from Ghana in west Africa. And so the terrorist told him that if he renounced Jesus, he would be set free.

No one is quite sure whether Matthew was a Christian before this or not. It doesn't really matter. This was his moment to escape the fate of his fellow construction workers. He was being given a 'get out of jail free' card. A chance to walk away and live another day. But instead, he replied, “I am a Christian. Their God is my God.” And so they cut off his head too.

Most of the martyrs in the church's liturgical calendar are from centuries ago. Men and women of the earliest days of Christianity who died in Roman amphitheaters. But the 21 martyrs of Libya have rather quickly found themselves in the commemorations of several church bodies. And while they're not officially part of the LCMS calendar (yet), I was struck by the number of fellow pastors who remembered them last Saturday.

They are an important reminder that there are still Christians around the world dying for the faith. Sacrificing their lives for the sake of Jesus Christ. And inspiring us to do the same. A fact that St Paul mentions in our Epistle lesson today.

*“Why am I in danger every hour? I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus?”*

Paul is referring, most likely, to the events of Acts 19, where a silversmith named Demetrius, fearing that people would stop buying his idols to the goddess Artemis, stirred up a riot against the Christians worshipping in Ephesus. Started dragging them into the amphitheater to have them executed. Executed, apparently, by being fed to beasts, although we don't hear about that part in Acts. Paul himself never actually fought with beasts in Ephesus, according to Luke's account. But he came close.

And so, Paul puts this question forward as a hypothetical. From a human perspective, what would he gain from fighting with beasts at Ephesus? In other words, what does he gain from being a Christian, other than a whole lot of danger and suffering? What good is being a Christian if it just results in a martyr's death?

It's a brutally honest question. It's a question that the Corinthian Christians needed to ask themselves. It's a question that American Christians need to ask themselves. Because we have a lot in common with the Corinthians in this regard.

Corinth was a wealthy city. One of the wealthiest in the entire Roman Empire. It had a standard of living well above most of Europe and West Asia during this time. It was an affluent, metropolitan hub of commerce in the Mediterranean. And, by all appearances, the church there was just as wealthy as the city around them.

But, unfortunately, all that money had made them a bit... soft. They had never really suffered in their lives for anything. They had never suffered poverty or hunger or war. And because they had never suffered these normal trials of life, they couldn't conceive of what it meant to suffer for Christ. They couldn't conceive of what it meant to be persecuted for the Gospel. The only opposition Paul ever endured when he lived in Corinth was from the Jews living there. And they were small in number and had very little power.

The Corinthians were soft and worldly and materialistic. Concerned only with the pleasure of today. They had embraced the Greek hedonism of saying, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." Don't worry about tomorrow. Just enjoy indulge in the pleasures of today.

And in response to that, Paul chastises them. He chastises them not with a word from scripture, but a quote from a Greek poet named Menander: "Bad company ruins good morals." The quote itself is telling them that they've let the world's influence corrupt them. They've let the "bad company" of Corinth ruin the good morals that God's Word has taught them. But the fact that he uses a pagan Greek poet to tell them that is adding insult to injury. Essentially, Paul's saying, "Even the Greeks that you're trying so hard to be like could tell you that you're heading down the wrong path."

But it's a message plenty of American Christians could stand to hear too. Because, in the grand scheme of things, we're pretty soft as well. We live in a wealthy country. With a standard of living way above most of the world. And we have a church that is just as wealthy as the nation around us.

We're soft. Most of us have never suffered real poverty. Real hunger. Real war, certainly not in our own community. We don't suffer a lot in America and so we have trouble even conceiving what it means to suffer for Christ. To be really persecuted for the Gospel. To be dragged into an amphitheater to fight beasts for a crowd. To be led out onto a beach and beheaded for believing in Jesus.

And yet, Paul's point isn't that the Corinthians need to suffer more. His point is that they are already suffering. We are already suffering. Because, for all our wealth and luxury, we still die. We are dying everyday. We are all still sons and daughters of Adam. We have still inherited his original sin. We still commit acts of actual rebellion against the Lord, just like he did. And we are still cursed with death as the punishment for our sin, just like he was.

So we can eat and drink today and pretend like life is hunky-dory. But tomorrow, we will die. Or the next day. Or the next. It's absolutely, inescapably, inevitable. You are dying. At this very moment. And there's nothing you can do about it.

And that existential reality, that brutally harsh truth, is essential to the Christian faith. Because when it comes right down to it, Christianity isn't about health, wealth, or prosperity. It isn't about peace and happiness in this mortal life. It isn't about sleeping your life away in a drunken stupor, like Paul says.

Christianity is about escaping death. Because nothing in this life matters if I'm just going to die at the end of it and spend eternity in hell. What is the point of that? The only thing that matters in the whole world is escaping death.

And that is exactly what our Lord gives to us. He gives us an escape from death. He gives us resurrection from the dead. He gives us eternal life with him. In bodies that are no longer subject to sin or death in any way.

What is sown into the ground is but a grain of wheat waiting to sprout into a green plant, full of life and fruitfulness. The world tells us that our mortal lives are all that matters. But we are but a bare kernel waiting to be buried in the grave. So that from that grave, we can spring up into something new and better and more fruitful than anything we have ever been before.

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. And we know this to be true because we've already seen it happen. We've already seen a kernel of wheat fall to the ground and die, so that on the third day, it could spring up and bear much fruit. We've already seen our Lord be buried in the grave and rise again. We've already seen that he has all power over heaven and earth and death has no power over him.

Those 21 martyrs went to their deaths with Jesus' name on their lips because they knew he was their only hope. They knew he was their only hope regardless of when their death would come. Whether it was by an executioner's sword on a beach in Libya or it was in their own beds in Egypt, dying a natural death at an old age. Their only hope was ever and always going to be in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Your only hope is ever and always going to be in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amen.