

The Gospel Unashamed

"From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth, from the laziness that is content with half-truths, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, O, God of Truth, deliver us."

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~ All articles are written by Terry Carter unless otherwise stated ~

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The Death of James



"1 Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. 2 Then **he killed James the brother of John with the sword.** 3 And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread. 4 So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover." **Acts 12:1-4 (NKJV)**

These four short verses are a tragic passage of Scripture. They record the first death of an apostle, specifically the apostle James. Later in this same chapter, we see another

apostle (Peter) miraculously spared the same fate. Before this chapter ends, the king (Herod) who was attacking the Church dies a gruesome death.

Let's take some time to consider some of the lessons that we can learn from the death of James.

First, we see that Christianity's gain is not in this life. The death of James occurred not much more than ten years after the Church began on Pentecost. That means that any gain or benefit that James received in this life by being a Christian was short-lived. Even if you add in the time James spent with Jesus during His ministry, any earthly benefit lasted less than fifteen years. It is interesting that James died shortly before the "Days of Unleavened Bread" or Passover. That means that he died just before the anniversary of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Obviously, Jesus Himself was far more interested in our salvation for eternity than He was in either His or our lives on this earth. Paul shared this

same attitude when comparing this life to the life to come.

"For to me, to live is Christ, and **to die is gain.**" **Philippians 1:21 (NKJV)**

"**If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.**" **1 Corinthians 15:19 (NKJV)**

All the apostles except for John are thought to have died for their faith. They were certainly not about "living their best life now". Their hope was not in this world or this life. Their hope was in Christ and the life to come in Him.

Second, nobody is indispensable to the Church. We need to remember that, even among the apostles, James was someone of note:

- He was one of the "Sons of Thunder", along with his brother John.

"**James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James, to whom He gave the name Boanerges, that is, 'Sons of Thunder';**" **Mark 3:17 (NKJV)**

He and John evidently had fiery personalities. At one time, they wanted those who rejected Jesus to be consumed by fire from heaven.

“52 and sent messengers before His face. And as they went, they entered a village of the Samaritans, to prepare for Him. 53 **But they did not receive Him**, because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem. 54 And when His disciples **James and John saw this, they said, ‘Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?’** 55 But He turned and rebuked them, and said, ‘You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. 56 ‘For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them.’ And they went to another village.” **Luke 9:52-56 (NKJV)**

It might be worth noting that James had wanted others to die and later became the first apostle to die as a martyr. On the other hand, his brother John is thought to be the only apostle who did not die as a martyr. Nevertheless, we ought to be careful what we wish on others, lest it come back on us later.

- He was there at the transfiguration of Christ.

“1 Now after six days **Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves;** 2 and **He was**

transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light.” **Matthew 17:1-2 (NKJV)**

- He was there at the Garden of Gethsemane.

“36 Then Jesus came with them **to a place called Gethsemane**, and said to the disciples, ‘Sit here while I go and pray over there.’ 37 And **He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee**, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed.” **Matthew 26:36-37 (NKJV)**

I wonder whether people in the Church worried about how the Church could survive without a leader like James. It is only natural to worry when a great leader among God's people dies.

However, we must remember that God is who we worship, and He is more than able to raise up new leaders for His people. When Moses died, there was Joshua ready to lead Israel into the Promised Land. Before Elijah was translated, Elisha was already “waiting in the wings”. Before Paul faced his death, Timothy had been trained as an evangelist in the Lord's Church. God has not left Himself without witness in the past, and He will not do so in the future.

The Church did not begin until Jesus had ascended into heaven. Who could have possibly been a better leader

than the Lord Himself? The very fact that the Church began and grew without the bodily presence of Jesus as a leader is evidence of its Divine nature. Clearly, God is working with and through the Church regardless of who is there leading bodily and who has left life on this earth. We would do well to remember that the Church was here long before any of us were here, and if the Lord tarries, it will be here long after we are gone from this earth.

However, whether your local congregation survives after you are gone depends, in part, on what you do now. It is possible to defile (or destroy as some translations render it) the temple of God if we are not faithful. The penalty for doing so is quite serious.

“If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.” I Corinthians 3:17 (NKJV)

In the context here, the temple is the Church. We should not get the idea that it does not matter what we do. Your own salvation and that of those in your community is at stake. But the Lord's Church will survive even without you. This is essentially what Mordecai said to Esther when she was considering whether to approach the king for her people.

“13 And Mordecai told them to answer Esther: ‘Do not think in

your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all the other Jews. 14 **'For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?'** Esther 4:13-14 (NKJV)

Third, sometimes it takes great trouble to get the Church to pray. We sometimes forget that we need to pray for one another. We are commanded to consider one another.

"Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you; but I will teach you the good and the right way." I Samuel 12:23 (NKJV)

"And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works," Hebrews 10:24 (NKJV)

Why is it that we so often wait for tragedy to strike before we pray for one another? Why not pray for one another before tragedy strikes? There is nothing recorded about the Church praying before James was killed. However, after his death, we do see them praying for Peter.

"Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church." Acts 12:5 (NKJV)

Peter was rescued from death, but James was not. Perhaps prayer, or the lack of it, is what made the difference between the two.

Fourth, some people have a twisted idea of religion and honor. Herod killed James and intended to kill Peter, both apostles of the Lord. He moved from James to Peter because he saw that killing James pleased the people. Yet, he keeps Peter in prison till after Passover. He has no qualms about killing apostles to improve his "poll numbers", but he will not do it until after Passover. He would not want to tarnish the holy celebration with an execution. This is blatant and wicked hypocrisy. He is straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel, just like the Pharisees.

"Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!" Matthew 23:24 (NKJV)

This reminds us of the Jews at the trial of Jesus. They were plotting to put an innocent man to death with false charges and a mock trial, but they were careful not to defile themselves by entering the Praetorium so that they could eat the Passover.

"Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas to the Praetorium, and it was early morning. But they themselves did not go into the Praetorium, lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover." John 18:28 (NKJV)

This Herod is much like his father who would rather kill a prophet of God than to break his impetuous promise or look foolish to those who were watching him.

"8 So she, having been prompted by her mother, said, 'Give me John the Baptist's head here on a platter.' 9 And the king was sorry; nevertheless, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he commanded it to be given to her." Matthew 14:8-9 (NKJV)

The Scriptures are full of examples of "leaders" who fear the people or are trying to please them rather than fearing God and trying to please Him. We see such things even today and not just among our leaders.

Fifth, God is still there, even when we face death. God is there when we face the death of a loved one. The death of Lazarus is a clear example of this. Jesus wept at his tomb. We see His compassion to the sisters when they confront Him over His absence when Lazarus died. We see His grief when He hears of John's death.

"When Jesus heard it, He departed from there by boat to a deserted place by Himself. But when the multitudes heard it, they followed Him on foot from the cities." Matthew 14:13 (NKJV)

The death of a loved one can be a very lonesome time, but we know that God is still there.

“Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, **“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”** Hebrews 13:5 (NKJV)

Isaiah saw a vision of the Lord in the temple the same year that king Uzziah died. Kings may come and go, but God is still on His throne.

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple.” Isaiah 6:1 (NKJV)

God is there when we face our own death. He was there at the death of Stephen.

“55 But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and **saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God,** 56 and said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”” Acts 7:55-56 (NKJV)

The angels carried Lazarus the beggar to Abraham’s bosom when he died.

“So it was that **the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom.** The rich man also died and was buried.” Luke 16:22 (NKJV)

The death of His saints is precious to Him.

“Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His saints.” Psalms 116:15 (NKJV)

Paul said that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

“We are confident, yes, well pleased rather **to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.**” II Corinthians 5:8 (NKJV)

We can count on the Lord keeping what we have committed to Him.

“For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that **He is able to keep what I have committed to Him** until that Day.” II Timothy 1:12 (NKJV)

At the start of this article, I mentioned that before chapter 12 of Acts ends, the king who attacked the Church is dead. He was eaten of worms and died a horrible death because he accepted worship as a god. The true God then showed everyone that Herod was no god at all, just a mortal man who died.

“21 So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. 22 And **the people kept shouting, “The voice of a god and not of a man!”** 23

Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died.” Acts 12:21-23 (NKJV)

In contrast to Herod’s inglorious ending, the Church grew and multiplied.

“But the word of God grew and multiplied.” Acts 12:24 (NKJV)

Kings come and go, but God’s Word endures. That is important for us to remember in this, and every election year. Persecution may kill and imprison some saints, but the Church continues. Kings may kill the body, but God will reward the soul.

“20 Daniel answered and said: ‘Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, For wisdom and might are His. 21 And He changes the times and the seasons; **He removes kings and raises up kings;** He gives wisdom to the wise And knowledge to those who have understanding.” Daniel 2:20-21 (NKJV)

Three people faced death in this chapter. James died for the Lord. Peter was spared by the Lord, for a time, to live for Him. Herod was struck dead by the Lord. None of us wants to end up like Herod. However, whether we live for the Lord like Peter or die for the Lord like James, never forget that God is there, and He is in control.