A MARTYR’S FAITH in a FAITHLESS WORLD

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For I am already being poured out as a drink offering,
and the time of my departure has come.

I have fought the good fight,
I have finished the race,
I have kept the faith.

Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness,
which the Lord, the righteous judge,
will award to me on that day,
and not only to me
but also to all who have loved His appearing.

2 Timothy 4:6–8
Contents

PART 1: THE WORD IS ALWAYS OPPOSED

St. Stephen: Martyr. Hero ........................................ 10
1. Christians Need Heroes ...................................... 13
2. The Planted Word ............................................... 19
3. Jesus Loves Me, This I Know ................................ 25
4. The Bible Is Not (Only) a Children’s Book ............ 29

PART 2: THE BIRD IS THE DEVIL

St. Perpetua: Martyr. Hero ...................................... 38
5. The Bird Is the Devil (Spiritual Warfare) ............... 41
6. A Declaration of War .......................................... 43
7. The Liar and the Lie ............................................ 47
8. The Field of Battle: The Three Estates
   and the Castle of the Conscience .......................... 51
9. The Devil’s Tactic: Attack Repentance ................. 63
10. The Armor of God ............................................. 71
11. The Cross Is the Devil’s Defeat ............................. 87
12. They Did Not Love Their Lives unto Death ........... 93

PART 3: THE ASSAULT OF SUFFERING

Polycarp: Martyr. Hero .......................................... 102
13. Suffering and the Attack on Hope:
    In the Rocks with Shallow Roots .......................... 105
14. Job, Suffering, and the Assault
    on the Preaching of the Altar ............................. 111
15. Peter’s Six Counsels to the Suffering.................117
16. Joy in Suffering ........................................129

PART 4: IN THE WEEDS

ROMANUS: MARTYR. HERO .................................138
17. In the Weeds: The Lust of the Flesh
    and the Pride of Life .................................141
18. Our Sinful Flesh .................................143
19. Lust Lives in Every Commandment ..............149
20. The Anatomy of Temptation .....................155
21. Sex and Money .................................159
22. Sanctification Is a Lot of Little Deaths .........169
23. True Freedom and the Full Life ................177

PART 5: GOOD DIRT

ST. AGATHA: MARTYR. HERO .................................184
24. Unless the Seed Falls to the Ground and Dies ..187
25. Jesus Is Our Champion .............................189
26. The Difficulty of Being Paul’s Enemy ............193
27. Encouragement for the Weary ..................197

EPILOGUE: LUTHER ON THE JOY
AND GLADNESS OF THE MARTYRS
AS THEY GO TO THE DEATH ............................201
PART 1
THE
WORD
IS
ALWAYS
OPPOSED
Three and a half years after the ascension of Jesus, the Church in Jerusalem was continuing to grow. New disciples were baptized and added to the number of Christians, and the administrative burdens were adding up.

The Twelve elected seven deacons to help care for the widows. Stephen was one of the chosen. He was “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (6:5) and was doing great wonders.

One synagogue in Jerusalem was particularly troubled by Stephen’s teaching. Some of the men stood against Stephen and tried to refute him, but they were unable to do so. Having failed, they started a rumor that Stephen was preaching against Moses and speaking blasphemies against God. They agitated against Stephen based on this rumor, so Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin, where false witnesses repeated the rumors.

Standing in front of the same council that condemned Jesus to be crucified, Stephen was also falsely accused. But he was unfazed. Even the council noted that “his face was like the face of an angel” (6:15).

“Are these things so?” the high priests demanded (7:1).

Stephen’s answer is a sermon that weaves together the two great themes of the Old Testament: the grace of God and the rebellion of the people. He defended himself a little. He accused them a lot. It turned out that the real rejecters of Moses and the true blasphemers of God were those who
crucified Jesus. “You stiff-necked people,” he concluded, without a touch of fear, “uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it” (7:51–53).

The council members were enraged. They ground their teeth at him. But Stephen, looking up to heaven, was given a vision of the throne room of God. He saw the glory of God. “Behold,” he said, “I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (7:56).

They shouted. They covered their ears. They rushed together at him. They grabbed Stephen, dragged him outside the city walls, and with fury stoned him. “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (7:59). Stephen was knocked to his knees, and with his dying breath he prayed for his murderers. “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (7:60).


We’ll meet in the resurrection.
Christians Need Heroes

We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.
(Hebrews 12:1)

I heard someone say, “You can learn all you need to know about a person if you know who their heroes are.” They were on to something. We live in the shadow of our heroes. We look up to them. We try to live like them. Our heroes encourage us and inspire us.

If they are good heroes, they encourage us to trust God and believe His promises in the midst of all sorts of trouble.

Christians need heroes who remind us of God’s mercy. We see in their lives how God forgives sinners and saves the ungodly. Heroes such as David and Paul remind us that the Lord can forgive murder, adultery, and raging against the Church.

Christians need heroes who remind us to thank God for all His gifts and that He raised up great men and women before us to teach us and bless us. Our heroes Moses and Matthew remind us to give thanks to God for their writings, for their Spirit-inspired wisdom recorded in the Scriptures for us.

Christians need heroes who can stand as examples, especially when the Lord gives us their same vocations and callings. Mary and Joseph are heroes for parents. Stephen is a hero for preachers. David is a hero for
rulers. And all the Christian heroes are our examples in faith and love, in prayer and joy, in patience, in suffering, and in death.


Christians need heroes who die.

The Christian hero is not the person who has obtained all that he or she desires in this life. Our heroes are not those who have gained the entire world but lost their soul. Our heroes are not those who have achieved a great degree of worldly success or notoriety. Our heroes are those who have fought the good fight and kept the faith, and who have finished the race. Our heroes are those who have stood against the wiles of the devil, who have stood against the wild beasts (see 1 Corinthians 15:32) of the world and the flesh. And having stood, our heroes are those who have died the blessed death.

Hebrews 11 puts these heroes before us and gives us clarity as to why they are heroes. Abel, Enoch, and Noah are not our heroes because they experienced all this world had to offer. Abraham and Sarah are not our heroes because they lived the life of their dreams. Jacob, Joseph, and Moses are not our heroes because of their fame or fortune. They are our heroes because they trusted in God. They are our heroes because they believed in the things God promised, things that they did not live to see. They never let go of these promises—not in life, in sorrow, in suffering, not even in death.

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. (Hebrews 11:13)

Dear Christian, your heroes are strangers, wanderers, exiles on earth. Your heroes have a discontent with this world, knowing that there is something better. They have their eyes on the resurrection, the life and the world to come. They have their hearts set on the new heaven and the new earth where righteousness lives (see 2 Peter 3:13).
But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared for them a city. (Hebrews 11:16)

The Bible puts before us heroes who lived by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). Faith means trusting promises. Christians walk by the words and promises of God. The goal of each Christian is to make it to the end of life still trusting in those promises. And this is the victory: to trust the promises of God through death.

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:32–40)

Do you see the suffering? Do you see the affliction? Do you see the dying? These are not the heroes in the movies. They are not the kind of people whom the world wants to follow. To do so means to follow them into death. These heroes are the great cloud of witnesses (see Hebrews 12:1) who are put before the Christian to encourage and enliven faith. These are the heroes God sets before us.
Consider this. If the goal that God has for us is to die in the faith, then the goal the devil has in mind for us is to put our faith to death. The devil does not want us to believe and trust in God. He does not want us to have the promise of the forgiveness of sins. He does not want us to attain the resurrection of the dead and life eternal. He does not rest in his attempts to overthrow us.

One of the devil’s tactics is to provide alternative heroes. Life, success, peace, comfort, fame, whatever—the devil’s heroes win a different fight. They finish a different race. They carry their accomplishments in this world as victory. The Christian heroes carry the cross.

This only makes sense.

Our true and ultimate hero, our champion and chief contender, is Jesus. Jesus, who died. Jesus, who took upon Himself flesh and blood so that He could die (see Hebrews 2:14–15). Jesus, the immortal God who bound Himself to our sin, our shame, even our death to save us.

We have a God who bleeds. We have a God who suffers. We have a God who was hated by the world. We have a God who had a tomb. We have Jesus, who says with His dying breath, “It is finished” (John 19:30).

“It is finished.”

There is so much in that little sermon of Jesus. There are so many things that are finished.

The work of salvation, which He came to accomplish: finished.
The sacrifice, the substitutionary atonement for the sins of humanity: finished.
The war between heaven and earth: finished.
The mad and endless attempts for us to win our own salvation: finished.
The way from death to life for sinners: finished.
The anguish of the cross, the suffering of God’s wrath in our place: finished.
The earthly work and life of Jesus: finished.
The death of Jesus is everything for us. It is our hope and life. It is our doctrine. It is our preaching. And it is even our example. Jesus shows us our finish line.
A lot of things can be accomplished in this life—a lot of things to do and see, to say and build, a lot of delight and suffering. But when it is all over and our last hour comes, only one thing matters: faith when dying.

Jesus says, “If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me” (Matthew 16:24). Faith is following Jesus through death to life. But first through death.

This, I think, is why Christians have always considered the martyrs to be heroes. The martyrs are those who died for their faith. They endured all sorts of terrible afflictions and abuse because they confessed Christ. They preached with their lives, their lips, and their blood. In the lives and deaths of the martyrs, we see the devil’s rage on full display, and we see that his rage comes to nothing—that he is impotent and overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of testimony of those who did not love their lives unto death (Revelation 12:11).

The martyrs remind us that there is nothing that the devil can do to us. The martyrs remind us that death is nothing to fear. The martyrs preach to us the victory of the death of Jesus. The martyrs show us how to die. The martyrs encourage us as we are finishing our race; they are cheering for us and reminding us what—or better, who—is at the finish line waiting for us. Jesus stands, waiting for us.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith. (Hebrews 12:1–2)
The Planted Word

*Receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.*

*(James 1:21)*

*A sower went out to sow.*

*(Matthew 13:3)*

Jesus is painting a picture for us, and we want to see it. Winter has ended. The sun warms the ground. It’s planting season. The farmer gathers the seed out of the barn, puts the satchel over his shoulder, and goes out to sow. His hand reaches into the bag, grabs a pile of seed, and flings it with gladness and hope into the soil.

The seed is sown in hope. The sower hopes that the seed will find a place, will take root, and will grow into a bountiful harvest. He sings and scatters and walks up and down his field, imagining the joy of the harvest a few months away.

Alas, not every seed matures. Not every seed grows into a plant. Some don’t make it.

This gets us closer to what Jesus wants us to know. It’s dangerous for the seed.
And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. (Matthew 13:4–7)

We can see it in our imagination as Jesus continues to paint the picture. Some of the seed falls onto the hard-packed dirt path, and the sparrows flutter around, snatching up the seed. The seed barely touches the ground before it is devoured.

Other seed falls in among the rocks. We have to imagine this with time-lapse: the plants grow up quickly, quicker even than the seed that falls in the good ground. They look healthy and robust, the best plants of all. But when the heat of midsummer comes, these plants lack the needed deep roots, and they wither and die.

Still other seed falls among the weeds and thorns on the edge of the field. These seeds also grow into little plants, but then the thorns surround them and choke them out. These also die.

Gloomy.

There is high drama in this field. The sower has sent out all this seed in the expectation of the harvest, but these seeds fail. None come to the intended end. This is the warning and wisdom of this parable: the seed is opposed. The seed is in danger. The seed is attacked from every side, and often overcome.

Jesus, though, does not end there. He has one more scene for us to see. Jesus brings us through the summer to the fall, to the harvest. The fields are full, and the sower now comes to reap the harvest.

Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. (Matthew 13:8)

There is hope. There is a harvest. Not every seed will make it, but the sower does not sow in vain. At the end, there is life and abundance. This is the picture that Jesus gives us, but what does it mean?
The disciples wondered the same thing, and we can thank God that Jesus told them.

The seed is the Word of God: the preaching of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The soils are the ears and hearts of sinners.

Beginning with the seed that falls on the path, Jesus explains:

**When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.** *(Matthew 13:19)*

The evil one is the devil. He stands opposed to the Word of God from the very beginning. Like the birds on the sidewalk, the devil and the demons are fluttering around the preaching of the Word, ready to snatch it away before it takes root.

Jesus continues to the seed in the rocks:

**As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.** *(Matthew 13:20–21)*

Here are Christians with tiny little roots. When trouble comes, their faith dries up and withers away. Trouble will come. “In the world you will have tribulation” *(John 16:33)*. Like the scorching sun on rootless plants, tribulation wreaks havoc on the Christian with shallow convictions.

The third group of seeds falls among the weeds and thorns. Jesus explains:

**As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.** *(Matthew 13:22)*

Cares, riches, the pleasures of this world are a danger to the seed, a danger to the Christian. Like weeds that grow up around a tender plant,
the cares of this world grow up around our faith and choke it out. It isn’t only bad times that attack our faith. The devil also uses good times and good things to cause our faith to wilt and diminish until nothing is left.

Jesus, with this parable, is outlining the three great dangers to the Christian faith and the preaching of the Word: the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. These three enemies stand opposed to us and the eternal life that the Lord desires to harvest in us on the Last Day. These enemies are ever-present, subtle, and dangerous. But these enemies and the disasters they bring don’t have the last word.

This parable of the sower is a parable of warning, but it ends with triumph—the seeds that fall in the good ground. With these, the sower finds the expected harvest.

> As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. *(Matthew 13:23)*

This is the end that Jesus is after. This is why He warns us about the dangers opposing our faith. And it’s why I’m writing this book.

Every word that marches out of the Lord’s mouth goes out to bless and bring forth life.

But every word that marches out of God’s mouth is opposed. God’s Word has enemies. The devil, the world, and our sinful flesh are its constant opponents.

The devil rages against the Word. The devil hates life. The devil hates what is good. The devil hates God’s wisdom and kindness. The devil hates God. The devil hates the Word of God. He rages against it with fury.

The world is set against God. It wants its own rule. It loves the darkness and not the light. It cowers at the light of the Word.

The sinful flesh sniffs after the bread crumbs of desire, following them to death. It is blinded to the joy, beauty, and wisdom of God. Its mind is set on earthly things, and God’s Word gets in the way of its pursuits.
The seed will always have birds, weeds, and shallow roots to contend with. The Christian’s faith will always face opposition. But there is always help. “God is my helper” (Psalm 54:4). Jesus is our Savior.

We will, in the chapters to come, consider the attacks of the devil, the assaults of the world, and the fights of the sinful flesh, and see what strength, confidence, and comfort the Lord offers us for the fray. The Scriptures don’t simply warn us about the dangers that face our faith, they also equip us for the fight. They expose the tactics of the devil, the world, and our flesh and give us all that we need to withstand the assault and, on the Last Day, stand with confidence in the Lord’s life.

This is a martyr’s faith in this faithless world. It is a pilgrim’s faith that wanders with an eye on the dawning glory. It is the Christian faith that knows that our glory is hidden in Christ, waiting to be revealed on the Last Day.
Jesus Loves Me, This I Know

_In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins._

(1 John 4:10)

First, before all else, we want to know what the “seed of the Word” is. What is the preaching that yields the fruit of eternal life? What is the Bible all about?

The Bible is a love story.

God is love. You are the beloved.

This is particularly astonishing when we consider how unlovely and how unlovable we are.

The Bible tells us about this in the story of our rebellion. It unfolds the depth of our wretchedness. It tells the history of our first parents, Adam and Eve, who took hold of and ate the only thing in the world marked with the sign “Do not eat!—God.”

That disobedience was death, and that disobedience and death continues in us. We are born in a state of rebellion against God, enemies of His kingdom. We deserve His rejection. We deserve His anger.

But God doesn’t give us what we deserve. We get, instead, His love.

The love of God is much more than a feeling and affection. Because we are in a state of rebellion, God’s love is a rescuing love. God’s love
is a seeking love. It is a bleeding and dying love. His love has work to do: work to make you right with Him, work to cover your rebellion.

This is why Jesus was born. The very Son of God became a human so that He could later be found bleeding and dying on a Roman cross: God forsaken by God for you.

Never was there love like this. Never was such a sacrifice made in all the history of history.

God took upon Himself the form of man—your humanity—so that He might dress Himself in your rebellion and take the punishment that you deserve, all so that you could live forever with Him. That really happened. No matter what else happens next, this matters most: the death of Jesus is the most significant event in the history of the world, and it is the most significant event in the history of your life (and in your death). The cross of Jesus is the most important thing to know, to believe, and to understand.

All of the great love stories of the Bible are the echoes and reverberations, mirroring or growing out of, the great love story of God and that cross, that death, that blood shed for you. That Jesus—truly and fully God and truly and fully man—your God, in your place, suffering, dying because He loves you.

The apostle John says it like this: “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10). John was copying Jesus, who said a few years earlier, “God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

It is the simple truth we teach the children, but it is also the confession on the martyrs’ lips as they go to die. “Jesus loves me.” This is the foundational truth of the Bible, the bedrock of our faith, and it is also the height of our wisdom.

While our focus is on Christian maturity, how to have a martyr’s faith in a faithless world, this does not mean moving beyond this simple truth.

So many books on discipleship and Christian maturity want to go beyond the Gospel, beyond the cross, beyond the simple truth, beyond
the faith of a child. “The Gospel for the unbeliever; the Law for the believer” seems to be the motto of the day. Rather, let’s do the opposite! Let’s consider together how it is that God can love us sinners. Let’s meditate on the mysteries of God as our Brother and our Friend. Let’s fix our minds and our hearts on Jesus, who is both the author and finisher, the beginning and the end, of our faith.

Christian maturity is comprised of this: knowing the love of God in Christ and living in that love.

This is how Paul saw it. In a mysterious, surprising, and delightful text, Paul tells the Ephesian Christians what he prays for them—that they would know what is unknowable! Here’s how he says it:

[I pray] that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:17–19)

Paul knows that it is impossible for our weak and rebellious minds to know the love of Christ. Still he prays that we would know the unknowable. This is the mystery of the Christian faith. We know what cannot be known, what cannot be comprehended:

That Jesus loves us.
That God has died for us.
That the Creator is our Rescuer and our Friend.
That He lives with us now, and we will live with Him forever.