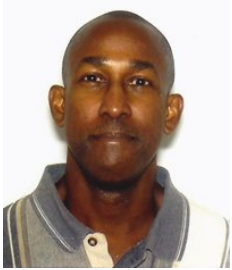


The Gift of Perseverance Is Never Obsolete

by Rolaant McKenzie



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Most Americans and Canadians probably still remember the popular anthology television series called *The Twilight Zone*, created by Rod Serling, which aired from 1959 through 1964, and continues in syndication today. Each episode tells a story in which the characters deal with often disturbing or unusual events, usually with a surprise ending and a lesson to be learned. Even today the phrase “twilight zone,” inspired by the series, is used in popular Western culture to describe strange or difficult-to-explain experiences.

One of the most memorable episodes was *The Obsolete Man* (Season 2, Episode 29, 6/2/1961). It described a future society ruled by a totalitarian state that took the tenets of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao to a greater extreme. Citizens determined to have no useful function to the state were declared obsolete, or nonessential, and executed. Romney Wordsworth was brought in and put on trial before the Chancellor to determine his existence in society. He professed his occupation as a librarian, and his belief in God. Since the state had eliminated books and libraries, it determined there was no use for librarians. Also, since the state had determined that God did not exist, all those who expressed faith in God were deemed to be without value. After an acerbic exchange, the Chancellor determined Mr. Wordsworth to be obsolete and sentenced him to death.

Mr. Wordsworth was granted the *right* to choose his method of execution as long as it was done within the mandatory 48-hour time period. He requested that he be granted a personal assassin, who would be the sole person knowing the method of his death, and that his execution be televised nationwide from his room. While highly unusual, the Chancellor agreed to both requests.



The Christian Martyrs' Last Prayer by Jean-Léon Gérôme (May 11, 1824 – January 10, 1904)

After technicians installed lights, a microphone, and a camera in his room, Mr. Wordsworth invited the Chancellor for the last hour before his execution at midnight. Out of curiosity he accepted this invitation, but also out of a desire to prove the fearlessness and strength of the state. With derision the Chancellor said to the condemned man,

“In a few moments you’ll be cringing and pleading just like they all do. You’ve got a worthless miserable little life, but you’ve also got an instinct for survival. And in a few minutes when you feel life slipping away, when you feel that your survival is just a question of minutes, we’ll see then which is the stronger, the state or the librarian.”

After a brief conversation, the librarian revealed the method of execution he chose. A bomb was set to explode in the room. The Chancellor expressed his approval of such a quick and painless death. But to his dismay, Mr. Wordsworth informed him that the door was locked, and they would die together, providing viewers with an opportunity to see how a librarian considered insignificant and obsolete by the state and a high authority of the state would react to facing imminent death.

With less than 30 minutes remaining, Mr. Wordsworth pulled out a worn, leather-bound book from a small wooden cabinet on the floor. He said,

“So, for myself, I am going to sit down and read my Bible. It has been hidden here for over 20 years. It’s a crime punishable by death, so it’s the only possession I have that has any value at all to me. So I am going to sit down and read it until the moment of my death.”

He read passages from the Psalms (23, 53, 59, and 130) expressing his trust in God. Mr. Wordsworth’s calm acceptance of death stood in sharp contrast with the Chancellor’s increasing panic as the countdown to midnight neared its end.

With less than a minute remaining, the Chancellor broke down and pleaded,

“Please, please let me out! In the Name of God, let me out!”

Mr. Wordsworth said to him,

“Yes, Chancellor. In the Name of God, I will let you out.”

And immediately he unlocked the door to let him out. The Chancellor with great relief and haste rushed out the door.

The last image those in the nation watching this televised spectacle saw was Mr. Wordsworth alone in his room with a peaceful look on his face, calmly holding his Bible close to him as the bomb exploded.

The librarian revealed in the story that, at the risk of death, he had a Bible hidden in his room for more than 20 years. He read it through the years to bolster his faith in God in a godless society. His habit of reading God’s Word helped him to trust Him, even to the point of facing death with calm assurance.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego faced a great test when

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, commanded all his government officials to bow down and worship the golden image he set up in the plain of Dura (Daniel 3). They could have rationalized obeying the king's command since a fiery death awaited them if they failed to do so, or that it was done under great duress and God would understand since they did not mean to worship the image in their hearts. But they did not respond in this way.

Not fearing the anger of the king, they told him that their God was able to deliver them from the fiery furnace put in place to deal with those disobeying his mandate. And even if God did not rescue them, they would in no way worship the golden image. They would rather die than disobey God. The wrath of Nebuchadnezzar was kindled even more than before, so he increased the intensity of the fire seven times and had them thrown in. To the king's amazement, not only were they not consumed, but he saw a fourth Person with them. This was a theophany, a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ. He Himself came and rescued His faithful children.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, because of their faith in the Lord and His Word (Daniel 1-2) had the divinely granted courage they needed to stand for God even though they did not know beforehand that they would be delivered. They were determined to remain faithful unto death.

Daniel himself, faced a similar situation when a law was put in place that prayers or petitions be made only to King Darius for 30 days, or else be thrown into a den to be consumed by lions (Daniel 6). He could have acquiesced and told himself that it was only for 30 days and that God would understand the impossible situation in which he was thrust. But because Daniel read, believed, and trusted the Word of God, he was gifted by Him to remain faithful and continue his prayers to Him only. Those seeking his demise prevailed upon the king to throw Daniel into the lion's den, but the Lord kept shut the mouths of the lions so that they did not harm him. He did not

know beforehand that God would deliver him, but he was determined to trust in Him alone in the face of a terrible death.

Polycarp, who lived between 70 and 155 AD, was a disciple of the apostle John, and is considered a father of the early Church. Several ancient sources document his written contributions, including letters written to the church at Philippi, where he encouraged the believers to remain strong in their faith and to flee from materialism. He served as bishop of Smyrna and was a defender of the faith against heresies like Gnosticism.

Perhaps the greatest contribution Polycarp made to Christianity was his martyrdom. During his life Roman emperors unleashed bitter persecution and death against Christians for denying the gods of Rome and proclaiming another Lord, Jesus Christ, instead of Caesar. The Roman government instituted a policy where its subjects were required to offer a small pinch of incense to Caesar's statue and declare, "Caesar is Lord." Those doing so would receive a certificate indicating that they did this and be allowed to participate in society. Those refusing would be executed.

Eventually Polycarp was arrested on the charge of being a Christian. His guards urged him to drop the pinch of incense and declare, "Caesar is Lord." He could have done so and reasoned that he did not really mean it in his heart, just as some professing Christians had already done. But he did not do so. When brought before the Roman proconsul, an angry mob howled for his blood. But the proconsul took pity on the gentle old man and pleaded with him to acknowledge Caesar as Lord. If he did so he could avoid being torn apart by wild animals or being burned alive. He could at that hour go home in peace. To this Polycarp responded, "Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" His full trust in Jesus and His Word granted him the fortitude from above to refuse to

compromise his faith. As he was burned alive at the stake, he uttered his final prayer on earth:

“O Lord God Almighty, the Father of Thy well-beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of Thee, the God of angels and powers, and all creation, and of all the family of the righteous who live before Thee, I give Thee thanks that Thou hast counted me, worthy of this day and this hour, that I should have a part in the number of Thy martyrs and in the cup of Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body, through the incorruptible blessedness of the Holy Ghost. Among whom may I be accepted this day before Thee as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, according as Thou, the faithful and true God hast foreordained, hast revealed beforehand to me, and now hast fulfilled. Wherefore also I praise Thee for all things, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee, through the eternal high priest, Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son. Through whom glory be to Thee with Him, and the Holy Ghost, both now and forever. Amen.”

Jesus says in Mark 8:35,

“For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it.”
(Mark 8:35)

The apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3:12 says,

“Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

Today all over the world Christians face similar kinds of situations and choices. In numerous countries, identifying as a follower of Christ can lead to family estrangement, social ridicule, or loss of employment. In many Islamic and communist nations, believers preaching the gospel and gathering with other Christians face imprisonment and death. Increasingly in Western countries that formerly believed in freedom of religious expression, godless politicians and bureaucrats have

forbidden believers from gathering together to worship and encourage one another. They have commanded that they cannot sing praises to God or corporately recite His word to bolster faith.

It would be easier to give in to fear and go along to avoid persecution as have many. However, others have faced fines and imprisonment for their obedience to Christ. God gifted them, and believers in many parts of the world facing greater persecution, with the courage and perseverance they needed because they trusted Him and His Word.

Leaving a religious organization or philosophy that denies the gospel brings its own challenges and can lead to some of the same kinds of consequences mentioned before. Forsaking family, home, culture, and other things that provide comfort for the sake of the gospel can seem to be an impossible thing. Especially if this includes imprisonment or loss of life. But things that are impossible for us are possible with God (Mark 10:23-30). The same God who caused us to be born again to a living hope through faith in Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:3-5) also granted the gift of perseverance and encouragement.

“For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 15:4-6)

Reading and studying God’s Word in context helps us to trust in Him. The accounts in Scripture of the faithful who faced daunting tests and remained true to the Lord when it was easier to take a different path are not obsolete. They were written for our edification so that we may have hope and be encouraged to persevere in the tribulations of our time.

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, ‘FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED.’ But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:35-39)

Knowing that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God through Jesus Christ gives us the divinely granted courage to leave false religion with all its worldly advantages for the gospel, suffer persecution with patience and hope, and even face death with calm assurance.

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