

# Present Yourself for Death...and Breath

Revelation 11:1-13

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You are scattered. They were all seated in the same rows. You are wearing dress shoes. They were wearing rubber-soled boots. You, sporting suits of varied color. They, all uniform, in uniform.

This too is a send-off. Family and friends, professors and classmates—they are here, knowing that soon you will be in a “there,” more distant. You, presenting yourselves for assignment on this 2008 Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Call Day, wearing suits, not uniforms; dress shoes, not rubber-soled combat boots...

...boots which were on the feet of the soldiers in the National Guard unit from Yankton, South Dakota, doing what National Guard units were doing throughout our country, mobilizing. There was a ceremony. It was in a gym. There was a speech. There were family and friends.

But there was at least one thing different. The family and friends were not sitting in the gym thinking first, “Hmm, I wonder where my child is going.” Would it be in the west or in the east? Would it be a big city or a rural one? Will they be on a base with lots of people or just a few? Now it’s true—in a respect, they already knew where their child was going: Iraq. But for the most part, the same is true today, a general awareness of the country to which your child is going.

So why wasn’t it in the front of the minds of those National Guard mothers and fathers whether their Daniel or John was going to Baghdad or Basra, Fallujah or Kirkuk?

Why? Because there was something else in the front of their minds. If you have ever sent a child off to war, you know. If you have ever sent a spouse off to war, you know. If you have ever sent a mommy or a daddy off to war, you probably know. You’re not thinking first about the place. You’re thinking that the one you love might die. What’s on your mind is the risk. What’s on your mind is the challenge. What’s on your mind are the enemies. Is that so different from today? You are praying today that God support your spiritual soldier—your son, your husband, your father...that God protect this pastor-to-be as he is sent today to face publicly enemies who desire his death. His physical death.

You, the men to be assigned, are not here to present yourself first for a place. You are in a gym to present yourself for death. When your cars drive away from this parking lot, when your parents wave goodbye to your moving van...departing is a young man who has presented himself to die.

This is the picture painted by the Apostle John in Revelation 11.

In the picture was a temple. In the inner part of the temple were God’s people. In the outer part of the temple should have been more of God’s people. Instead, occupying a portion of that place intended for God’s people were people who didn’t love God. In the visible Christian church, enemies of the truth, enemies who would trample on God’s holy city for three and a half years. Three and a half is a special Revelation number, half of the number seven. This three and a half years, or 42 months, refers to the New Testament era, the years post-“ascension of Christ” until the end of time.

So, right now. Spiritual enemies.

In John’s picture there was more. Two witnesses for the truth. They were lampstands, lights in a dark world. They used divine authority and power to confront those who opposed them— like Moses, who turned water to blood in the presence of Pharaoh; like Elijah, who announced no rain on unbelieving Israel.

Then suddenly a beast. He attacks the two witnesses. They die. Two witnesses, now two corpses. But it isn’t just death. It is shame in death. Every people, tribe, language and nation gloat. The world, gloating at the death of the truth tellers.

You are a truth teller. Are you ready to die? Or do you hear that and think, “Death? Perhaps in another time, or maybe in a foreign land, but today? Here? It doesn’t feel like there is that much risk in being a pastor.

To be a pastor? Actually, I’m looking forward to it almost with a sense of relief. I’ll finally have a house, not a dorm room. Our family won’t have to move anymore. Insurance—we’re going to have regular health insurance! People will support us. Neighbors will be friendly to us.

And the world gloating over the death of truth tellers? Well, I’m sure there are some bad people in the world. But in many ways, I don’t feel that different from most of the world. They like video games. I like video games. They shop at malls. I shop at malls. They watch American Idol. Well, I did skip Tuesday’s show for the vicar call service, but...

Yes, I know the world is messed up, but it doesn’t feel like that much of a threat to me. So sure, I’m ready to die. Because I really don’t think I’m going to have to.

Why are soldiers going to Iraq or Afghanistan seemingly more aware of real danger than we Christians can be? Probably because there is an immediate penalty for lack of focus. If a man in combat boots isn’t fully aware of the dangers that lurk, a bullet or bomb brings pain that many of us can probably not imagine.

On the other hand, for Christians, closing one’s eyes to a spiritual danger can sometimes lead at first to an apparent easier time.

The enemy initially identified in Revelation 11 is an enemy that operates within the outward Christian church. The presence of false teaching in places using the name Christian is nothing new. In our day, there is great pressure to avoid noting difference. There is pressure to compromise teaching, or if it’s clear that compromise wouldn’t come off very well, then perhaps just avoid teaching something that might make one uncomfortable. It is subtle. It can come at you from a direction unexpected. In a moment, it can look so easy to hedge just a bit, to avoid a problem with someone we’d like to keep a friend. Risking spiritual danger, with the expectation of an apparent easier time.

A confession of the truth need not be in response to a false teaching. When my brother is caught in some other sort of sinful action, I am to restore him gently, watching myself, lest I also be tempted. But if I talk to him, he might think I’m all about me. If I humbly speak to a fellow pastor who is struggling with a sin, what if he laughs me off and tells the other guys in my circuit and pretty soon, maybe someone elsewhere hears about this, and more people will look down on me...we don’t know this will happen, but these are kinds of thoughts that can go through one’s mind when one is calculating whether to speak to a fellow pastor, or a classmate at the Seminary, or a member of my church, at a moment when God has commanded me to be a brother and a help. I, ready to keep quiet, imagining a potentially easier time.

Witnessing the truth to a stranger. Even to one we might never meet again. What a battle, that new man inside of us longing for an open door to talk about eternity; our flesh, looking for every excuse to avoid it. Reminding me that I’ve never yet had a conversation about the weather that ended in hurt feelings. Risking spiritual danger for the offer of an easier time.

The question really is, “Do you love Jesus more than anything? More than what people think of you? Ready to take a stand for truth, even at the risk of losing a secure income. Loving Jesus so much that you are ready to give up your life, and so lose your family, perhaps a wife, your little baby, a friend?

Do you love Jesus more than anything? The inner man inside of you says, “I do!” But that wicked sinful flesh—our wicked sinful flesh—fights so hard against that. Our sinful flesh has dragged us into so many moments of which we are ashamed. Moments where we set Jesus to the side for something far less than our life. Moments that come flooding into our memory when we hear a verse like, “Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.”

Do you ever wonder if Jesus is going to have to lie? When I stand before him, and I know the times I have fled in my heart from being brave and bearing witness to the right thing...is Jesus going to have to lie for me to get into that Holy City?

For all the times we have been poor witnesses, dear Father, forgive us our trespasses.

My friends, Jesus is not going to lie. He's going to tell the truth. He's going to say that you are a perfect witness. And if he explains, he'll talk about a rough Thursday and torturous Friday, and then he'll talk about a father's love, love so seemingly opposite of all that we'd expect love to be. "Father, remember, you made me sin for that young man who waits to hear his call, for those friends and family that fill this room. The fear of facing a sinner's fate—that was mine. The horror of knowing that somebody knows, and the secret is about to be exposed—that was mine. The terror of the darkest eternity—I faced. I shuddered, and I, God from God and Light from Light, begotten from you, Father, overcame. I defeated, I smashed and I rose."

And I tell you the truth, you will be with me in Paradise, washed in water, cleansed in blood.

"And about that 'confession before men' part, Father, I am the faithful witness, and these men and these women are dressed in my righteousness."

Hear the witness of Jesus. That is the light of the lampstand. This is the happy ending in the message of the witnesses.

And then they were killed. And then they were killed?

Witnesses are light. They preach happy endings. Through them God longs for every human to be saved. But witnesses torment as well. Humbly, patiently, lovingly, yet firmly they expose the devil's lies in the hearts of those who sin.

This the world hates. This the world despises. This the world into which you are now entering in a public way rejects.

Are you ready to die? You are. You are ready to speak the hard truth. You are ready publicly to condemn that which is evil. You are ready to suffer all, even death, for the truth. With God working in you both to will and to act in line with his good pleasure, you will rejoice when you are counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.

Let us encourage one another in this, brothers and sisters, as long as it is called Today. And let us be ready, each individual one of us, to give up everything for Jesus, even life itself.

Let's say that moment comes. The enemy took your life. Christians who remain witness the gloating. The world imagines a victory.

For three and a half days—symbolic of a very short time—the corpses lay exposed in the street. The silenced witnesses, objects of ridicule. The enemies dancing. The opponents cheering. The mortal armies of the devil himself gloating.

"But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, 'Come up here.' And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on."

Then an earthquake. Then enemies of God died. The enemies of God, terrified.

My friends, you are not accepting the option of defeat when you determine today that you are ready to witness to the point of death. The death of a witness is temporary. The defeat of your enemies is for certain, forever.

For a Christian spiritual soldier to present himself for death, then, does not cast a pall over this ceremony. To present yourself for death does not leave a fearful lump in your family's throat. To present yourself for death is to present yourself for a path to certain victory.

Today, present yourself not so much for a place, but for a purpose. Present yourself for death . . . and for divine resurrection breath.

Amen.