

MORE THAN LIFE ITSELF

Sermon by Ken Kreider

1/4/07

Scripture Reading: Revelation 12:10,11

10 And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night. *11* And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.

Introduction

How much do you love God? I mean, how much do you REALLY love God? More than life itself? Occasionally my wife will ask me to do something and I'll jokingly respond, "I'd walk 500 miles in the snow for you – barefoot." But what would we do for God? He gave His own Son to die for us because of His great love for us. Do you love God so much that you'd be willing to die for Him? Would you rather die than sin? Does God expect our obedience to the point of death? Just how important is obedience to God? Someone once asked me, Why can't we just go ahead and sin and then go to God and ask for repentance? Is that the attitude of a truly converted person? And let's consider a more extreme case, where one must choose between dying and committing a known sin. Would it be O.K. to sin then? Now, I hope I am never faced with that choice, although based on what I've read about last day events, we as Sabbath keepers may all be faced with that choice before long. By now, you are probably saying, "Ken, you ask a lot of questions, but you haven't given us any answers." Yes, and I did that on purpose. Because hopefully, in doing that, I'll have your attention. To help answer these questions, I'd like to share with you a few illustrations.

Foxes Book of Martyrs

Back in the 1800's, Protestant Christians often had no other reading material other than the Bible and the Fox's Book of Martyrs, which is an account of the persecutions of Protestant Christians down through the ages. It is not for the faint of heart. You read about the use of various instruments of torture, including the rack, the gridiron, and boiling oil. It also talks about many of the great reformers such as Luther, Calvin, and Wesley. When I first became familiar with the Fox's Book of Martyrs, I was amazed to read about the fortitude of so many Christians who remained faithful to God and were often faced with the choice to either die or do something against their consciences. I'd read you an account or two from the book, but we're about to have lunch and some of the stories of torture and cruelty are a bit greusome. I can hardly take it myself. It almost makes me faint just to think about the torture that they endured. Sometimes they would be in the middle of being tortured mercilessly and they would be asked, "Are you going to give in now?" But they stood firm.

Tortured by the Romans

In the days of the Roman Empire, Christians were asked to burn incense in front of an idol or to die if they refused. They were burned at the stake, eaten by ferocious wild animals, or tortured by machines in the dungeon. Many times, they could have stopped it by a simple motion of the hand. But they would rather die than to deny their Savior.

Boy Scouts

I saw a program recently about some Boy Scouts who went hiking on an unmarked trail in the Grand Canyon during 112 degree heat of the summer. When they were almost out of water, one of the boys shared his water with two of his friends, and I thought, "What a noble thing to do." He later died of heat stroke as they were finally approaching the Colorado River. In a sense, he gave his life for his friends. That story reminded me of what Jesus has done for us. He died so that we might live. But what will we do for Him?

Four brothers

During the Maccabean Era, there was a king in Asia by the name of Antiochus Epiphanes who had an intense hatred for the Jews, supposedly because the Jews rejoiced over the death of Ptolemy of Egypt. So Antiochus ordered his guards to seize each and every Hebrew and to compel them to eat pork and food sacrificed to idols. This story comes from a historical book called the 4th Book of Maccabees. I'll read you an excerpt from it:

[3] If any were not willing to eat defiling food, they were to be broken on the wheel and killed. Many Hebrews were seized and one aged leader by the name of Eleazer was brought before the king.

[6] "Before I begin to torture you, old man, I would advise you to save yourself by eating pork,

[7] for I respect your age and your gray hairs. Although you have had them for so long a time, it does not seem to me that you are a philosopher when you observe the religion of the Jews.

[8] Why, when nature has granted it to us, should you abhor eating the very excellent meat of this animal?

[9] It is senseless not to enjoy delicious things that are not shameful, and wrong to spurn the gifts of nature.

[10] It seems to me that you will do something even more senseless if, by holding a vain opinion concerning the truth, you continue to despise me to your own hurt.

[11] Will you not awaken from your foolish philosophy, dispel your futile reasonings, adopt a mind appropriate to your years, philosophize according to the truth of what is beneficial,

[12] and have compassion on your old age by honoring my humane advice?

[13] For consider this, that if there is some power watching over this religion of yours, it will excuse you from any transgression that arises out of compulsion."

[14]

When the tyrant urged him in this fashion to eat meat unlawfully, Eleazar asked to have a word.

[15] When he had received permission to speak, he began to address the people as follows:

[16] "We, O Antiochus, who have been persuaded to govern our lives by the divine law, think that there is no compulsion more powerful than our obedience to the law.

[17] Therefore we consider that we should not transgress it in any respect.

[18] Even if, as you suppose, our law were not truly divine and we had wrongly held it to be divine, not even so would it be right for us to invalidate our reputation for piety.

[19] Therefore do not suppose that it would be a petty sin if we were to eat defiling food;

[20] to transgress the law in matters either small or great is of equal seriousness,

[21] for in either case the law is equally despised.

[22] You scoff at our philosophy as though living by it were irrational,

[23] but it teaches us self-control, so that we master all pleasures and desires, and it also trains us in courage, so that we endure any suffering willingly;

[24] it instructs us in justice, so that in all our dealings we act impartially, and it teaches us piety, so that with proper reverence we worship the only real God.

[25]

"Therefore we do not eat defiling food; for since we believe that the law was established by God, we know that in the nature of things the Creator of the world in giving us the law has shown sympathy toward us.

[26] He has permitted us to eat what will be most suitable for our lives, but he has forbidden us to eat meats that would be contrary to this.

[27] It would be tyrannical for you to compel us not only to transgress the law, but also to eat in such a way that you may deride us for eating defiling foods, which are most hateful to us.

[28] But you shall have no such occasion to laugh at me,

[29] nor will I transgress the sacred oaths of my ancestors concerning the keeping of the law,

[30] not even if you gouge out my eyes and burn my entrails.

[31] I am not so old and cowardly as not to be young in reason on behalf of piety.

[32] Therefore get your torture wheels ready and fan the fire more vehemently!

[33] I do not so pity my old age as to break the ancestral law by my own act.

[34] I will not play false to you, O law that trained me, nor will I renounce you, beloved self-control.

[35] I will not put you to shame, philosophical reason, nor will I reject you, honored priesthood and knowledge of the law.

[36] You, O king, shall not stain the honorable mouth of my old age, nor my long life lived lawfully.

[37] The fathers will receive me as pure, as one who does not fear your violence even to death.

[38] You may tyrannize the ungodly, but you shall not dominate my religious principles either by word or by deed."

4Mac.6

[1]

When Eleazar in this manner had made eloquent response to the exhortations of the tyrant, the guards who were standing by dragged him violently to the instruments of torture.

I'll not go into all the gory details of his torture except to say that they would periodically stop to ask if he had changed his mind and, of course, he did not. He remained firm as a rock. The story continues:

[14] "Eleazar, why are you so irrationally destroying yourself through these evil things?"

[15] We will set before you some cooked meat; save yourself by **pretending** to eat pork."

But he never gave in.

[16]

But Eleazar, as though more bitterly tormented by this counsel, cried out:

[17] "May we, the children of Abraham, never think so basely that out of cowardice we feign a role unbecoming to us!
[18] For it would be irrational if we, who have lived in accordance with truth to old age and have maintained in accordance with law the reputation of such a life, should now change our course
[19] become a pattern of impiety to the young, in becoming an example of the eating of defiling food.
[20] It would be shameful if we should survive for a little while and during that time be a laughing stock to all for our cowardice,
[21] and if we should be despised by the tyrant as unmanly, and not protect our divine law even to death.
[22] Therefore, O children of Abraham, die nobly for your religion!
[23] And you, guards of the tyrant, why do you delay?"
[24]

When they saw that he was so courageous in the face of the afflictions, and that he had not been changed by their compassion, the guards brought him to the fire.

[2] For when the tyrant was conspicuously defeated in his first attempt, being unable to compel an aged man to eat defiling foods, then in violent rage he commanded that others of the Hebrew captives be brought, and that any who ate defiling food should be freed after eating, but if any were to refuse, these should be tortured even more cruelly.

[3]

When the tyrant had given these orders, seven brothers -- handsome, modest, noble, and accomplished in every way -- were brought before him along with their aged mother.

There response to all of this was:

[19] O men and brothers, should we not fear the instruments of torture and consider the threats of torments, and give up this vain opinion and this arrogance that threatens to destroy us?
[20] Let us take pity on our youth and have compassion on our mother's age;
[21] and let us seriously consider that if we disobey we are dead!
[22] Also, divine justice will excuse us for fearing the king when we are under compulsion.
[23] Why do we banish ourselves from this most pleasant life and deprive ourselves of this delightful world?

[1]

"Why do you delay, O tyrant? For we are ready to die rather than transgress our ancestral commandments;

Then they proceeded to torture these boys one by one, from the oldest to the youngest, while their mother watched. The descriptions of how each one was tortured are quite horrible and even somewhat gross. After each one they would say to the next, O.K., you saw what just happened to your older brothers. Save yourself by eating a little pork. But none of them gave in.

[6] The mother of the seven boys, more than any other mother, loved her children. In seven pregnancies she had implanted in herself tender love toward them,

[7] and because of the many pains she suffered with each of them she had sympathy for them;

[8] yet because of the fear of God she disdained the temporary safety of her children.

[9] Not only so, but also because of the nobility of her sons and their ready obedience to the law she felt a greater tenderness toward them.

[10] For they were righteous and self-controlled and brave and magnanimous, and loved their brothers and their mother, so that they obeyed her even to death in keeping the ordinances.

Although she witnessed the destruction of seven children and the ingenious and various rackings, this noble mother disregarded all these because of faith in God.

Satan has tried down through the ages to rid the world of true Christianity by torture and cruelty, but as we read in the book Great Controversy, the blood of Christians was seed. The more Christians were tortured, the more people were converted to the truth.

Daniel Eats Only Vegetables

This story reminded me a little of Daniel, who refused to eat the king's food. But we all know that his story had a much happier ending, with Daniel and his three friends impressing the king. It also reminds me of two other stories also found in the book of Daniel.

Daniel in the Lion's Den

In one, Daniel refused to adhere to the new law not to pray except to the king for 30 days. He knew the consequences of his refusal. But he did not even hide in the closet to pray. He was not ashamed of his Lord. He boldly opened his window and prayed there as he always did. And when he was thrown to the lions, God protected him.

Ellen White says:

PK ch44 In the Lion's Den (start)

“The prophet's enemies counted on Daniel's firm adherence to principle for the success of their plan. And they were not mistaken in their estimate of his character. He quickly read their malignant purpose in framing the decree, but he did not change his course in a single particular. Why should he cease to pray now, when he most needed to pray? Rather would he relinquish **life itself**, than his hope of help in God.” **PK ch44**

Daniel's Three Friends

The other story I am reminded of is about Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshack, and Abed-nego. They were asked along with thousands of others to bow down to the king's golden statue when the trumpet sounded or be thrown into the fiery furnace. I heard Pastor Doug Batchelor once comment: “At that point, they might have said, “Now would be a good time to tie our shoe laces.” But they didn't. They took a stand for God, knowing the consequences. They said to the king,

Daniel 3:17 “Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. *18* But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.”

They knew that they might die, and they were willing to die rather than to violate one of God's commandments.

I'd like to read you some inspiring words about this from ch41 of the book Prophets and Kings:

PK ch41 The Fiery Furnace (end)

More than life itself

“Important are the lessons to be learned from the experience of the Hebrew youth on the plain of Dura. In this our day, many of God's servants, though innocent of wrongdoing,

will be given over to suffer humiliation and abuse at the hands of those who, inspired by Satan, are filled with envy and religious bigotry. Especially will the wrath of man be aroused against those who hallow the Sabbath of the fourth commandment; and at last a universal decree will denounce these as deserving of death.”

“The season of distress before God's people will call for a faith that will not falter. His children must make it manifest that He is the only object of their worship, and that no consideration, not even that of **life itself**, can induce them to make the least concession to false worship. To the loyal heart the commands of sinful, finite men will sink into insignificance beside the word of the eternal God. Truth will be obeyed though the result be imprisonment or exile or death.”

Adam & Eve

I used to be a literature evangelist while I was attending college and once I was trying to tell someone the importance of keeping the seventh-day Sabbath and they responded, “Oh, God wouldn't be nit-picky about a thing like that.” Later as I reflected on that response, I thought about Adam and Eve. God asked them not to eat of the fruit of one tree of the Garden of Eden. Would God be nit-picky about a thing like that? Just how serious is God about what he commands? You know the story. They ate of the fruit and the whole world was plunged into sin.

Lot's Wife

And what about Lot's wife. God asked them not to turn around and look at the burning of Sodom & Gomorrah as they were leaving the city. Would God be nit-picky about a thing like that? Or does God really mean what He says? You know the story. Lot's wife turned to look and instantly she was turned into a pillar of salt.

Annias & Saphira

Oh, you say, that's the Old Testament God. O.K., I do want to be fair. Lets consider Acts chapter 5. That's in the New Testament. Ananias and Saphira his wife had made a pledge to donate the sale of a property to the cause. But when they sold it, they kept back a portion of the proceeds for themselves. Would God be nit-picky about a thing like that? Let's let the Bible answer that question. Let's read Acts 5:5 “Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things.”

What is the attitude of a truly converted person?

Huss and Jerome

You may have heard the story of two famous martyrs who lived in the 1300's. Their names were Huss and Jerome. They were champions for Jesus. They went about proclaiming the truth of the gospel throughout Bohemia. But they both died by being burned at the stake. One papist said, “Both bore themselves with constant mind when their last hour approached. They prepared for the fire as if they were going to a marriage feast. They uttered no cry of pain. When the flames rose, they began to sing hymns; and scarce could the vehemency of the fire stop their singing.” GC110

On Huss' head, they placed a pyramid shaped hat, which had paintings of figures of demons with the word 'Archheretic' on the front. Huss said, "Most joyfully will I wear this crown of shame for Thy sake, O Jesus, who for me didst wear a crown of thorns." Then they said, "Now we devote thy soul to the devil." "And I", said Huss, lifting up his eyes toward heaven, "do commit my spirit into Thy hands, O Lord Jesus, for Thou hast redeemed me."

Jerome was just as noble. He said, "What! Do you suppose that I fear to die?" As the flames rose about him, his last words were a prayer, "Lord, Almighty Father," he cried, "have pity on me, and pardon me my sins; for Thou knowest that I have always loved Thy truth." GC115 And his voice stopped, but his lips continued to move in prayer.

You see, their attitude was, just as we read in scripture: You can kill the body, but you can't kill the soul.

Saddiq

In some places it is not easy to be a Christian. Saddiq was a Muslim who was converted to Christianity by an evangelist. He went home and told his wife that he wanted to be a Christian. The next day when he got home from work, he found his house empty and his wife and children gone. His father-in-law had helped move them out. A few days later, he lost his job. Then he was assaulted by his own relatives and almost beaten to death. He fled for his life and found a minister to baptize him. But anyone who finds him will count it a duty to kill him. It takes great courage to be a Christian in some parts of the world.

James 5:10,11

10 "My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. *11* Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord--that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful."

1 John 2:3-6

3 "Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. *4* He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. *5* But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. *6* He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked."

So going back to our original question – How important is obedience to God? The answer is extremely important. It is a matter of life and death.

1 John 5:2,3

2 "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and **keep His commandments**. *3* For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome." But you can make an excuse for sin once in awhile when times are hard. Is that what it says? No!

2 "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and **keep His commandments**.

2 John 1:9

9 "Whoever transgresses ^{F4} and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son."

But what if we have to suffer?

James 1

2 “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, **3** knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.”

Yes, we may be persecuted. Is that bad news? A little. But it’s also good news.

Mt 5:10

10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. **11** "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. **12** Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

But what if we have to die?

Rev. 12:11

11 “And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.”

If you are truly converted, you won’t be saying, Oh, I wish I could do this or that. Our greatest joy will be to simply do God’s will. What is God’s will? If your not sure, this book (the Bible) will tell all about God’s will and his character.

Ecc. 12:13 “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. **14** For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.”

Now does that just mean, “keep His commandments”, or does that include loving His law and really wanting to keep His commandments and do the will of God from your heart?

John 4:23,24

23 “But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. **24** God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

So we see here, it’s not just the letter of the law, but it means keeping His commandments even in our minds, our thoughts – in spirit and in truth. I truly believe that if we are true followers of Christ, we will learn to love God’s law and sin will become hateful to us.

And so, back to our second original question. Why can’t we just go ahead and sin and then go to God and ask for repentance? It shouldn’t even be a question now, but we read in:

Hebrews 10:26

26 “For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,”

Hebrews 10

31 “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. **32** But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings:

33 partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; 34 for you had compassion on me ^{F45} in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, (And here comes the real good news) knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. ^{F46} 35 Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward.”

To add to that, we have:

Romans 6:15

15 “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! 16 Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? 17 But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. 18 And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.”

So if you are ever faced with that terrible choice of sin or death, don't worry about this life. God has something far better for you. Trust in God. And who knows, it may be that He will deliver you like He did Shadrach, Meshack, and Abed-Nigo.

Mt 10:28

“And do not fear those who kill the **body** but cannot kill the **soul**. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both **soul** and **body** in hell.”
You can kill the body, but you can't kill the soul!

As for this life, we are here but a short while.

Ps 103:14

14 “For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust. 15 As for man, his days are like grass; As a flower of the field, so he flourishes. 16 For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, And its place remembers it no more.”

Is 40:7,8

Surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever.”

So let's make the best of our time while we're here by honoring God and by keeping His commandments in spirit and in truth.

I'd like to read to you a poem. You may recognize many lines of it from verses of scripture. It was made into a song also and made popular by Steve Camp several years ago, but I'm just going to read it to you, because it fits so well here. It's called, “Consider The Cost”:

To obey is better than sacrifice
And to hearken than the fat of rams
For what will a man give for his own life
Houses or money or lands

There's a way that seems right to you
But in the end it leads only to death
But come unto Him all ye weary
Come and find your rest

Consider the cost of building a tower
It's a narrow way that you must come
To do the will of the Father
Is to follow the Son

To love Him more than father or mother
To love Him more than even your own flesh
To give all that you are, for all that He is
This is the gospel according to Jesus

Many will say "Lord, Lord" on that day
Look what we've done in Your name
"We've prophesied and performed many miracles
And Lord, even the demons obeyed"

Then the Lord will declare unto them
The most terrifying words of truth
"Depart from me ye workers of iniquity
For I have never known you!"

Oh foolish man, how you build on the sand
Trusting in your goodness to save!
For when the rain falls, and the flood breaks the walls

You will be swept away!
But blessed is he who builds on the Rock
Who takes Jesus as Lord to save!
For when the rain falls,
He will endure it all
Standing firm in His grace!

Consider the cost of building a tower
It's a narrow way that you must come
To do the will of the Father
Is to follow the Son

To love Him more than father or mother
To love Him more than even your own flesh
To give all that you are, for all that He is
This is the gospel according to Jesus.

Mink

Mink trappers in England have an interesting way to trap mink. They go to the den of the mink and cover the entrance to the den with grease and position the trap in such a way that the mink has two choices. The mink will have to make a decision. "Am I going to soil my beautiful coat with grease? Or am I going to go across the area where there is not grease, where I think there is something that ought not to be there. And the mink almost ninety-nine percent of the time will choose the trap and lose his life. He would rather die than soil his robe. And that's the way we ought to be. We don't want to spoil our robe.

So let's be like Daniel and his three friends, and Huss and Jerome, and those seven brothers, and Saddiq, who were willing to give their all, even their lives if necessary, and loved God more than life itself. Let **us** love God more than life itself.

Shall we pray.

Dear Father in Heaven,

You demonstrated Your great love for us when you risked all of Heaven and sent your only Son to die for us. We ask Lord that You would inspire in us the same kind of love for You. We are only human, but with You working in us and through us, we can be invincible and we have seen over and over again that You can work mightily through those who are 100% committed to You. Please help us to follow You with our whole hearts by keeping your commandments in spirit and in truth and by trusting in You. Help us to not be moved from your holy law and from the truths that we hold dear. Help us to always be willing to take a stand for You.

In Jesus name,

Amen

Our closing song was written by one of those great reformers, Martin Luther, who always took a bold stand for God's truth even in the face of death and as a result started a great Reformation.

Closing Hymn: Hymn #506 A Mighty Fortress (#255 in the Spanish Hymnal)

Shall we pray,

Dear Father in Heaven,

As we just sang, let us not become too attached to our goods, our kindred, or even to this mortal life, but help us to always put You first and foremost in our lives, for Your kingdom is forever.

In Jesus name,

Amen