

**NO GREATER LOVE
CHRISTMAS EVE 2009
1 JOHN 4:10-14**

“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. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

“By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world.”¹

Whenever we leave the boundaries of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, it is difficult to imagine that we will find a passage that points us to Christmas. However, the Apostle John certainly speaks of God’s gift of life in this passage of the Word. “God . . . loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. . . . The Father has sent His Son to be the Saviour of the world.” In the gaiety and warm glow of the Christmas Season, we are prone to overlook the reason for the Master’s incarnation—Jesus came to present His life as a sacrifice because of our helpless condition. Very God became a human being so that He might present His life as atonement for mankind’s sinful condition.

Nevertheless, Jesus did come, and the reason for His coming was our helpless condition. The Word of God speaks of this when the Apostle wrote, “While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. . . . God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” [ROMANS 5:6, 8]. The Son of God gave His life to secure our life. Facing the cross, Jesus boldly addressed this issue when He said, “Now is My soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save Me from this hour?’ But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify Your Name” [JOHN 12:27, 28a]. The Master knew that He had been born to give His life as a sacrifice because of our inability to provide atonement for sin.

Let me remind you of a dark truth. You and I are sinners. We were born under the curse of sin brought on by the sin of our first parents. The Word of God tells us that “the wages of sin is death” [ROMANS 6:23a]. Even were we to live a perfect life—sinless life, we are yet born sinners and therefore under sentence of death. The evidence that this is so is witnessed in the death of infants who have committed no overt sin. However, the Son of God was born to provide salvation to all who are willing to receive that divine gift. The gift is free to any who are willing to receive it, though it cost Christ the Lord His life as a sacrifice for sinners.

Those, whose lives have been transformed through being born from above, have a new attitude toward others who share this Faith and toward others outside the Faith. Having experienced Christ’s sacrifice, they are prepared to live sacrificially. Jesus said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another” [JOHN 15:12-17].

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

We are not accustomed to thinking of Jesus' command that His disciples must love one another as a text pointing to Christmas. However, Christians are taught to exhibit a sacrificial attitude toward others—even toward those who are not their friends. I want to share with you a story that did not make many headlines, though it did appear on one American newscast.

Murderers who rampage in the name of their religion have become commonplace in news headlines. While they imagine they are serving their god through violence, Muslim homicide bombers are malignant examples of hate-filled people who are deceived by the devil. One recent story from Pakistan provides a story of such a murderer with a Christian twist.

To understand the story I'm about to tell, you need to understand the conditions for Christians in that country. Pakistan is an Islamic republic, and the population is subject to a form of shari'a law. Less than two percent of Pakistan's population are Christians; ninety-five percent of the population are Muslims. Christians are openly discriminated against—most relegated to the most menial jobs in society—garbage collectors, sewage workers and servants. Christians are prohibited by law from holding prominent positions in government; only a Muslim can be President or Prime Minister.

Pakistan's blasphemy laws mean that Christians can be accused of blasphemy if they fail to show "proper respect" to the Koran or if someone thinks they fail to respect Mohammed, founder of the religion of Islam. In addition, Christians are often brutalised, and the police are not inclined to help. For instance, during this past year, news headlines documented multiple outrages for which there has been no redress.

In January, thieves gang-raped a girl in front of her parents after learning they were Christians. In March, a thirteen-year-old girl was raped for two days before being released. In June, a Christian man was raped and murdered for refusing to convert to Islam. In June, again, a Christian was murdered from drinking tea from a "Muslim" cup. In July, Muslim mobs burned over one hundred Christian homes, murdering many people because of a false report that a Christian had burned a copy of the Koran at a wedding. Again in July, police robbed and beat Christian sewer workers.² Women and girls are often kidnapped, raped and forced to convert to Islam. It is difficult to estimate how many men have been executed because Muslims conspired to testify that they "defile" the name of the prophet Mohammed.

Despite the hardships, the Christian population is steadily growing as the believers live out their Faith before the watchful eyes of their Muslim neighbours. A common surname for Christians is Masih, which means "Messiah."

It was a day, perhaps like any other day, at Islamabad's International Islamic University. It was late October and a lowly janitor, Pervaiz Masih, was completing his first week on the job, sweeping the floor in the cafeteria on the woman's side of the University. For his humble work, Pervaiz Masih would receive almost \$60 each month. His seventy-year-old mother would work cleaning a nearby house to help make ends meet. Pervaiz would live, with seven other family members, in a single room of an apartment in Rawalpindi.

A suicide bomber, disguised in women's clothing, was making his way toward a cafeteria filled with some 300 to 400 women students. He shot the guard and rushed toward the cafeteria, when Masih came between him and his goal. Masih saw the bomber approaching the cafeteria and refused to let the bomber pass. He told him there were women inside and he could not enter. In the process the bomb detonated, killing Masih, the bomber, and three girls nearby. Meanwhile, the 300 to 400 Muslim girls inside the cafeteria were unharmed.

² Accounts compiled from information provided by Persecution.org, International Christian Concern, <http://www.persecution.org/suffering/countryinfodetail.php?countrycode=4>, accessed 24 December 2009

In the rubble resulting from the explosion lay two martyrs. A so-called Muslim ‘martyr’ had maliciously murdered others. Meanwhile, a Christian martyr had laid down his life for his brethren. A Christian died to save Muslims from a fellow Muslim.

Professor Fateh Muhammad Malik, a rector of the university, stated that Pervaiz Masih “rose above the barriers of caste, creed and sectarian terrorism. Despite being a Christian, he sacrificed his life to save the Muslim girls.”

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that not “despite being a Christian,” but *because* of being a Christian, Masih laid down his life.

The news cameras showed the garbage-strewn cemetery where Masih is buried less than a meter from a muddy road. As the camera focuses on his family standing at the grave, you see one of his sisters pick up an empty cigarette pack someone threw onto the little mound of earth. The family had to borrow money to pay for Masih’s funeral, and now they are behind on the rent. His mother would like to one day decorate his grave. He is, she says, her hero. “I would like him to have his name in cement with a nice poetry verse,” she says. “And there should be a fence surrounding his grave.”³

Looking at the humble burial site, the garbage thrown onto the plot in which his mother and wife were forced to bury him, one is compelled to think of the strange values of our world. A King is born and compelled to be laid in a manger. A hero selflessly gives his life for people that despise him, and is buried beneath garbage. One day, this upside-down world will be turned on its head as Messiah comes in glory.

I’m not surprised that Pervaiz Masih acted selflessly. Almost any conscientious Christian would act selflessly because that is the example they have in their Master. He surrendered the trappings of glory to come to earth as a babe born into a humble family. He worked quietly with His hands, and surrendered His life at the right time because of our condition. Then, He conquered death and brought hope to all who have faith in Him—the risen Lord of Glory.

As you celebrate Christmas this year, focus—if even for a brief moment, on the hope that is ours because of the Master. Remember the glory that we shall share with Him. Then, filled with hope and anticipation, live selflessly and boldly so that the world may see Him at work in your life. As you pray, ask the Master to give courage and strength to our brothers and sisters that suffer because of His Name, and give thanks for His mercies to us. Amen.

³ A compilation of accounts provided by Mark Earley, “Greater Love: A Christian Martyr in Pakistan,” Breakpoint, <http://www.breakpoint.org/commentaries/13935-greater-love>, accessed 23 December 2009, and by Ivan Watson, “Christian janitor died saving Muslim students,” CNN, November 11, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/11/11/pakistan.hero/index.html>, accessed 23 December 2009