

There is a ten year period in the history of the Christian Church that has earned the inauspicious title, “The Great Persecution”.

It began on February 23, 303 AD. The Roman Empire wasn't what it used to be, and as people tend to do, they looked back to “the good ol' days” and figured if we can just recreate that we can return Rome to glory. Faced with mounting pressure to return Rome to its historical, traditional values and religion, the Roman Emperor Diocletian set the bull's-eye on the steadily growing ranks of Christianity.

By command of the Emperor, Christian churches were burned to the ground. Christian worship was banned. All across the Roman Empire those who professed to be Christians were told to hand over their Bible's so that every Bible in Rome could be burned. Christians in high places lost their jobs. Christians with homes were kicked to the street, their property confiscated. The pastors were thrown into jail.

One year later, in 304, the persecution escalated. Rome decided that every Christian had to make a public sacrifice to the Roman gods – and if you didn't you would be killed.

And so Christians died. Brave Christians refused to turn their backs on Jesus and died because of it. Whole communities of Christians were wiped from the face of the earth in what has become known as “the era of the martyrs.”

But after a decade of unparalleled persecution, with Christianity on the run, in February of 313 a Roman named Constantine took control of Rome.

According to Constantine, he had a dream in which his destiny was tied to Christianity, so he signed into law the Edict of Milan which formally ended “The Great Persecution.” Just ten years after the Edict of Milan Constantine would make Christianity the official religion of Rome.

And then an interesting thing happened. All over the Roman Empire Christians began to come out of the woodworks. Now that Christians weren't in danger of martyrdom anymore, Christian people who had hidden their faith for a decade to avoid persecution suddenly started claiming to be Christians again. Christians who had caved to the pressure and pretended to worship Roman gods to avoid losing their homes, jobs, and very lives, started worshipping the true God again.

And that caused a problem.

You see, those who had stuck with Christ (displaying strong faith) - those who had lost fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, sons, and daughters; those who had been forced to flee from their homes and jobs, living on the run in constant danger for a decade because they refused to hide their faith in Christ – those folks didn't look too kindly on those weak Christians who had hidden their faith and turned their backs on Christ to save their own skin. They didn't want to have anything to do with them.

And maybe, if you are good at empathizing, you can understand why. For a decade those Christians whose faith was strong enough that they refused to bow to the pressures of Rome had suffered through a living nightmare. And it all could have been avoided if they just did what the Romans demanded and sacrificed to the Roman Gods (you know, just kept their fingers crossed behind their backs).

But God's Word was clear. **Worship the Lord your God and serve him only!** Jesus himself said, **“Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.”**

And yet, here out of the woodwork come all these “Christians” who disowned Jesus before others, who sacrificed to Roman gods to avoid persecution...

And they were just supposed to welcome them back? “Oh, don't worry about it. I watched my family be slaughtered, I lived on the run, sleeping in a cave, starving half the time for having the strong faith that you didn't have, but don't worry about it. We'll just pretend that didn't happen. God will forgive that. You'll get heaven too, just like us.”

It doesn't take too much imagination to get why this caused all sorts of problems in the church at that time.

But here's the thing: even though, from a human perspective, we can understand the frustration of those who had endured The Great Persecution doesn't make it right.

The simple truth is, just like Peter in the courtyard on the night before Jesus died, it is entirely possible to deny Jesus and still go to heaven because Jesus did for that sin too.

Jesus actually told a few parables that envisioned this exact same scenario – people who had sacrificed a lot for Jesus because of the strength of their faith getting upset at those who didn't sacrifice nearly as much for Jesus because of their weak faith... and Jesus' teaching behind those parables: It's not the strength of your faith and greatness of your sacrifice that saves you. It is the object of your faith that saves you.

So in the 300's, after *the era of the martyrs* was done, some teaching, some healing had to happen.

Those Christians who had faced persecution and demonstrated incredibly strong faith needed to be reminded of an incredibly important truth. It is not the strength of our faith that saves us. It is the object of our faith that saves us – a lesson Jesus teaches very powerfully and clearly in John chapter 3.

The Gospel we just heard from John 3 is a portion of Jesus' midnight conversation with a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus is an interesting man. The Bible makes pretty clear that he had faith in Jesus as his Savior. He is one of the men that helped give Jesus a proper burial after his death on the cross – but it appears that his faith was pretty weak, at least to start with.

John tells us that Nicodemus was a Pharisee – and it's no secret that Jesus wasn't at the top of the Pharisees "People We Love" list. But Nicodemus wasn't ready to write Jesus off like the rest of the Pharisees. He was drawn to Jesus. He wanted to talk to Jesus, to learn from Jesus. But, perhaps understanding the persecution he might face if he displayed genuine curiosity in Jesus, he comes to Jesus in the middle of the night, in secret.

He came to Jesus and starts the conversation with some classic hedging: "So I know a guy, Jesus - a guy who wants to know more about you. It appears from all these miracles you're doing that you must be someone from God." He didn't even ask a question. He just floated this out there and hoped Jesus would bite, hoped that Jesus would respond.

And Jesus did respond. He did what we can't - he saw the weak faith in the heart of Nicodemus, and he told Nicodemus what he needed to hear.

And what Jesus says to Nicodemus here in John 3 is one of the most beautiful and clear explanations of how one gets to heaven in the whole Bible (John 3:16, the one passage that 99% of Americans know). It's God's Great Exchange, the beauty of the whole Bible boiled down to one short, to the point, conversation.

How are you going to be saved, friends?

Is it going to be based on how much you love Jesus? How well you love Jesus? How long you've loved Jesus? How transparently you love Jesus? Are you going to be saved because your faith was strong enough – whatever that means? Are you going to be saved because your faith was stronger than the next guy?...

Today Jesus answers a question that ought to be the single most important question: how are you going to be saved? When you die and are standing at the gates of heaven and God asks you, "Why should I let you in?" What's the right answer? And in this answer Jesus does for Nicodemus and us what we can't do ourselves – he strengthens faith.

**"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."**

How will you be saved?

Is it because our faith was strong enough? Is it because our strong faith led us to sacrifice enough?

*I sure hope not.* Because I, even a full time servant of God, who has what anyone would consider a strong faith have to confess that for all of the times I've stood up for Jesus in faith, there are just as many, if not more times, when doubt, fear, worry, and selfishness made me cower in the dark corners of sin – hoping that no one sees.

You see, when it comes to answering this question – the single most important question in the world: how will you be saved – it doesn't matter how strong your faith is. It doesn't matter if you have the courageous faith of a 4<sup>th</sup> century martyr, or the timid faith of a fourth century closeted Christian. It doesn't matter if you have the well-informed, powerful faith of the Apostle Paul or the weak and timid faith of Nicodemus. It doesn't matter how much or how little sweat and blood you have poured into your faith life. It's not the strength of your faith that saves you. It's the object of your faith that saves you.

It's like that snake on a pole in the middle of the desert we read about in our first lesson today. No one got to say, "I looked at the snake first. I looked at the snake more intently than you. I looked at the snake better than you!"

No, they simply looked at the snake and lived, because the object of their faith – the snake, and more specifically the promise God connected with that snake – is what saved them.

And just like that snake was lifted up in the desert, so the Son of Man was lifted up and everyone who believes in him, whether or not that belief is strong enough to move mountains, whether that faith leads to martyrdom or disowning of Jesus in a moment of weakness, whoever looks to Jesus with faith has eternal life.

You don't get to look at Jesus and say, "I looked at Jesus first. I looked at Jesus more intently. I looked at Jesus better."

No, you simply look to Jesus and you have eternal life because it is the object of faith, not the strength that makes it saving faith.

Think of it this way (maybe some of you have heard me share this analogy before):

Three guys were traveling through the woods of northern Wisconsin in the dead of winter. Hungry, tired, and cold they each came to a frozen river. On the other side they saw the lights of a town – food, warmth, and a cozy bed.

The first guy was a Florida native. He had grown up in the south and had come to Wisconsin to see snow for the first time in his life. He looked at that ice and he was scared. He had no idea if that ice would hold him. So, he spread himself out on his stomach, taking up as large a surface area as he could. He inched his way across the ice sweating cold bullets, his heart racing at every creak and crack the ice made. He made it across, safe and sound, and went to town.

The second guy comes to the river. He's from Illinois. He doesn't know the area very well, but it's January in Wisconsin. He's pretty sure the ice will hold. So, he grabs a stick and walks across the ice, hitting the ice in front, to make sure it is strong enough. He too makes it across, safe and sound.

The third guy is a local – born and raised in northern Wisconsin. He knows it's been below freezing for over a month now. There is at least a foot of ice on that river. He cruises across the river on his snow mobile dragging a sled full of kids and heads into town.

The faith those three men displayed varied greatly. But the ice, the object of their faith, was the same, rock solid, ice for all three.

So it is with Jesus.

Whether you have the faith of a martyr and would die rather than renounce your faith in Jesus, or if you have the faith the size of a mustard seed, look at John 3 and know that it is the object of your faith, not the strength of your faith that makes it saving faith.

Now that doesn't mean we shouldn't care about growing faith. Going through life terrified and worried because we aren't sure whether Jesus can hold our weight isn't a very enjoyable way to live. But today isn't about that. Today is for the Nicodemus' of the world – for those times when you look in your heart and you see it full of worries and doubts and you realize how inadequate and imperfect your faith is. Today Jesus undeniably says to you, "I've got this. Your faith may not be what it should be, but that won't stop me from being the Savior you need me to be."

Just imagine what this conversation must have meant to Nicodemus when he took Jesus' dead body down from the cross. Maybe right here in John 3, when Jesus is kind of vaguely talking about the Son of Man having to be lifted up like the snake in the desert, it didn't all click for Nicodemus. But when he stood there looking at Jesus lifted up on a cross before it came down, did it click? Did that lightbulb go off? He's up there, so I can have life – eternal life.

It's as easy as looking and believing. We simply look at Jesus, raised up on a cross for me, and we have eternal life, because it is the object of our faith that saves us – not the strength of our faith.

And the object of our faith is Jesus – the man who walked on water, who gave orders to the wind and the waves, who healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, and fed 5000 men from a boy's lunch; most importantly Jesus, the Son of God, who left heaven to be lifted up on a cross so he could be the ultimate fulfillment of that bronze snake on a pole, the one who fully and completely removed the wages and punishment of sin by his death on the cross.

When you worry, when you doubt, when you prove the weakness of your faith by your sin, look at Jesus and know you are saved.

Amen.