

## **No Joke**

*2 Timothy 3:1-5*

**D**uring a period of sixteen hours in April 1974, tornadoes rampaged through thirteen states, from Alabama and Georgia in the south, to Michigan in the north, and in one Canadian province. When the storms had subsided, 315 people had been killed, nearly 5500 had been injured, and property damage came to more than a half billion dollars. The paths of the various tornadoes added up to nearly 2600 miles.

From that one storm, six of the tornadoes reached the highest level on the scale used to measure the intensity of tornadoes. When it was all over, the total number of tornadoes came to 148. In one neighborhood in Louisville, Kentucky, a tornado carrying 250-mph winds destroyed 900 homes in 20 minutes.

In Xenia, Ohio, 18-year-old Ruth Venuti was waiting for a friend to drive her home after school, when she saw a large black cloud about two and a half miles away. She ran to alert the 15 members of the school's drama club, rehearsing in the school auditorium. English teacher David Heath thought she was joking, and started to tell everyone to forget it and go back to rehearsing.

Instead, he jumped down off the stage and told everyone to follow him so they could get a good look at it. He figured they could see it and go right back to rehearsing. But by now that angry monster was less than 200 yards away. Cars parked in front of the school began to bounce around. Heath and the students ran into the corridor, and crouched down beside the walls on either side. A noise, which sounded to them like the "clattering of a thousand sets of Venetian blinds, along with tremendous crashing and grating sounds," was accompanied by a lot of flying debris.

For four minutes they tried to protect themselves against the walls. When it was all over, no one in the school had been killed or seriously injured, but the entire top floor of the building had been blown away. Part of the roof had collapsed into the auditorium where the drama club had been rehearsing. And right on the stage where they had stood just minutes before lay a school bus, upside down.

And to think that they at first thought it was a joke.

There are “tornadoes” of a different kind which have dipped down into the lives of certain followers of Christ throughout the centuries, and they have found themselves facing tornadoes of persecution. And it was no joke.

The times we face in our day were foretold in the Scriptures we’ve just read. In verse one, the word translated “terrible” could be rendered “painful, tragic, grievous.” In Matthew 8:28, the word is used to describe two men who had been possessed by demons, and they are pictured as being “exceedingly violent.” That is the word used in verse one to describe what it will be like in the last days.

Just as a tornado can leave a path of destruction, there has been a path marked by the blood of believers in Christ, who have been killed or persecuted in other ways for no other reason except that they were Christians. Numerous examples abound from around the world.

In March 1919, the people of Korea began to protest heavy-handed Japanese rule, crying out for freedom. The Japanese retaliated, making Christians an example for everyone else. Churches and mission schools were burned to the ground. Travelers were stopped and interrogated; those who confessed faith in Christ were killed immediately. Thousands of pastors, Bible teachers and other Christians were rounded up and crowded into freezing, smelly jails. Christian nurses who tried to help the injured were arrested. Because he refused to stop praying for the sick, one pastor was thrown into prison.

The storm of persecution intensified, as Christian men were commanded to sign confessions and tortured in despicable ways. Their fingers were pressed over red-hot wires. They were beaten with sharp hooks and seared with hot irons. With heads forced back, hot water or a solution of water and red pepper was poured down their nostrils. Slivers of wood were shoved far under their fingernails. For hours and days at a time, the tortures continued, until sometimes the men would confess, whether they had anything to confess or not.

The dragon-shaped country of Vietnam was the place where over fifty-eight thousand Americans died. Most Americans saw the graphic news reports on television, and many protests took place in our country concerning our military involvement in that country. Yet most of us never heard of the atrocities experienced by the Christians of that country, just because they were Christians. The horrors of that war have overshadowed the severe persecution Christians have suffered in that country every year for more than a hundred years.

In our time, the Chinese government has begun a three-phase campaign to eradicate Protestant house churches within ten years. They will not even be able to meet outdoors. The only churches that will be allowed to continue will be those who are led by clergy who are state-trained and sanctioned.

In Northern Nigeria, just this week, a church was bombed—the seventh so far this year—and 20 believers were killed. And just in the month of April this year, similar atrocities have been carried out against churches and Christians in Azerbaijan, Indonesia, Kenya, The Sudan, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, The Philippines, India and Syria.

Just this week, Denmark has made it mandatory for clergy to perform same-sex marriages.

If we have heard of those persecutions in other parts of the world, we may have shaken our heads in disbelief, but then were comforted by the fact that those kinds of things happened in other countries; certainly those storms would never break out here in America.

Guess again. The storms are different, of course, at least for the time being. Perhaps because it is not so open and obvious, it is much more dangerous and insidious. But the fury of satan against the people of God is real, just the same. No joke.

Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, recently began requiring all organizations on campus to have a non-discriminatory policy regarding its members and leaders. Sounds pretty good, right? Lift the hood on that one, and you discover that what that means is that even Christian organizations are required to have homosexual leaders if they want to remain on campus. It's no joke.

Our President has recently endorsed same sex marriage. In early May (2012) when voters in North Carolina approved a constitutional amendment in support of traditional marriage, Democratic governor Beverly Perdue was outraged. She was quoted as saying, "Folks are saying, 'What in the world is going on in North Carolina? We look like Mississippi.'"

There is a form of "music" these days called "death metal," and one of the death metal bands is called "Diecide." The word "diecide" refers to the killing of a god, and that is pretty much what their music is about. They have a song entitled "*Kill the Christian.*" Here are some of the lyrics:

*Armies of darkness unite  
Destroy their temples and churches with fire*

....  
*Kill the christian  
Kill the christian...dead!*

We say, “How terrible that is!” But the work of satan in our own country is not always so noticeable. Seventy-eight percent of Americans claim to be Christians, even though the term may be loosely defined! Yet we stand by and pretend that the storms which are breaking out across our country are somebody else’s business. Sixty-five million Americans now have an incurable sexually transmitted virus, yet our country steadfastly refuses to teach abstinence for those who are unmarried, and faithfulness for those who are. It’s pretty obvious that there are a lot of people who claim to be followers of Christ who are pretty loose when it comes to personal morals. It’s no joke.

In South Carolina, Mariah Kirby was named “Student of the Year” at the public school she attended. But when she wanted to use *one* verse from Proverbs in her graduation speech, she was told that she couldn’t use a “religious quote” in a public school. The verse was Proverbs 13:4, which reads, “*The sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied.*” It never mentions God or Jesus, yet simply because it was *from the Bible*, she was told she couldn’t use it. Only after contact from attorneys who actually know something about the Constitution was she allowed to use the verse.

Every ten seconds, an American child is reported abused or neglected, which comes to six million children every year. Every day five children die as a result of abuse or neglect. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 1 in 4 women will be victims of domestic violence at some point in their lives. More than one million women here in America are assaulted by their partners every year. It’s no joke.

The Barna Research Group of Glendale, California, has recently found that 43% of Americans say it doesn’t matter what religious faith you follow because they all teach the same things. Half of Americans believe that all people are eventually saved or accepted by God no matter what they do. Among those who call themselves Christians, only twenty percent of Americans say they live their lives completely dependent on God. It’s no joke.

How loudly do you think animal-rights activists would protest if researchers started extracting body parts from the fetuses of kittens and puppies, while they were yet in their mother's wombs? Yet in June 1993, President Bill Clinton signed into law the National Institutes of Health Revitalization Act. This bill authorized, for the first time in history, government-funded research using tissue from aborted human fetuses, following the highly-touted theory that this tissue could be "harvested" from aborted babies, and perhaps benefit someone else.

Well, so what? Many, including some well-meaning Christians, would say that there is really nothing wrong with this, that if abortion is legal anyway, why not make use of the tissue from those fetuses, especially if it will benefit those who are still living? If you are among those who feel this way, perhaps you need to open your eyes and hearts to the storm that is coming. It's no joke. Do some reading on your own to find out how that tissue is acquired, and don't be fooled by the use of sterile wording by those who don't want you to know the truth.

The tissue cannot be taken after a baby is born—that would be murder. So it must be done during an abortion procedure before the baby is born. The surgical method is called a D&X, or dilation and extraction. I'm trying to be tactful here, because I realize there are young ears present today, but we all need to understand that when the word "tissue" is used in relation to research, they're talking about brain tissue. If you'll think about that for half a second, you'll realize what has to happen for that brain tissue to be "harvested."

And during the time that America's church-goers are gathered in houses of worship all over our country this morning, 138 precious babies will have lost their lives through legalized murders called abortions. That's more than two every minute, 3300 every day, 1.2 million every year in our country alone. Every two days we kill more babies than all the American lives lost so far in Iraq. That's no joke. In the years since the *Roe v. Wade* decision by our Supreme Court, more than 50 million babies have died.

Is homosexuality a sin? That was the question asked to more than 2,000 Americans in a random-sample survey by LifeWay Research in September 2011. Only 44 percent agreed with the obvious and plain teaching of Scripture and said yes.

DC Comics has announced that one of its time-honored super heroes, "The Green Lantern," is and always has been a homosexual. Home Depot has become notorious in its promotion of the homosexual lifestyle, even holding workshops and providing funding for parades featuring nudity and lewd acts. Target has

entered the fray, donating 100% of its Tshirt sales this month to fight for same-gender marriages, and if you're a member of AARP, part of your membership dues have gone to support legalizing homosexual marriages.

And now, JCPenney, founded in 1902 by a man deeply committed to Christ, has featured in their Father's Day ad this year a homosexual "couple" playing on the floor with their two children. When you just glance at the ad, it appears to be just two guys playing on the floor with two kids—warm and fuzzy. But read the copy: "What makes Dad so cool? He's the swim coach, tent maker, best friend, bike fixer, and hug giver—all rolled into one. Or two." At the bottom are these words, "Real life dads Todd Koch and Cooper Smith with their children Claire and Mason."

One group, called "One Million Moms," has dared to stand up to the promotion of this lifestyle, and they have been called a "hate group" for their efforts. But any kid in kindergarten can tell you that name-calling is hateful in itself! Besides, just because I disagree with you doesn't mean that I hate you. Come on.

It has become common in our day for anyone who opposes the homosexual lifestyle to be called a "homophobe," meaning that if you oppose them, you're afraid of them. So let's say this out loud: Having a conviction about what the Bible teaches about homosexuality does not make me a homophobe. It means I believe what the Bible says. Having an opinion or conviction about what the Bible says about homosexuality does not make anyone homo"phobic." I can have a conviction that the sky is blue but that doesn't make me have a phobia about the colors red or green. Having a conviction does not equal to being afraid of something.

What is probably more accurate is that those who oppose a lifestyle that honors Christ are "Christophobic." Yes, they are afraid of Christ!

The President's recent mandate requiring employers to pay for contraceptives flies in the face not only of Catholics, but of every American who values liberty. It is a fight the Catholics didn't start, but it is a fight directed against those who have convictions based on moral principles and values. And so unnecessary. It serves no purpose other than to intimidate and chip away at faith-based convictions.

Churches are being kicked out of public facilities across our country. In New York City, where any other group can rent a school building for their use, churches have been told to get out—they're not welcome anymore. Christians are lambasted and mocked in the media. Watch almost any show on network television, and the



goofy, crazy person will be the Christian. The criminal will be a Christian or one who reads the Bible. The one who is insane will be a Christian, sending a message that the only reason you would want to be a Christian would be because you're insane.

We're told we can't pray in public, and in fact, some have been arrested for doing just that—right here in America. Right here in America, some have been arrested for peaceful assembly when all they did was stand and read the Bible out loud. No joke! We could go on and on about this, giving example after example. But I think you get the picture.

But now let's get *another* picture. This is what the **Bible** says. Jesus told us that these things would happen, so we should not be surprised. In Matthew 10:22, Jesus Himself said, "*All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.*" He said in John 15:18-19, "*If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.*"

Peter told his readers, "*First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires*" (2 Peter 3:3). And he was right. Paul was right when he wrote to the Roman Christians:

*Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator... Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. (see Romans 1:24-32).*

Doesn't that accurately describe our day and time? And it's no joke.

Not only are we Christians pretending that these things do not happen, we also get offended when our ministers and pastors dare to warn us of the storms which are advancing daily in our schools, our legal system and throughout our country. We sit in shocked silence when a sermon includes references to the atrocities which are going on in our country. We say the preacher should stick to preaching the Bible and stay away from controversial subjects.

Tell that to Jeremiah. Tell it to Ezekiel. Tell it to Paul. Tell it to Jesus.

Such an attitude is probably one of the main reasons why America is even now tottering on the edge of a moral precipice. We close our eyes and pretend that everything is so much better than it is. Why stir things up? Why disturb us and our children with such morbid tales? Because the Scripture tells us *“The discerning heart seeks knowledge, but the mouth of a fool feeds on folly”* (Proverbs 15:14). And because we have a commandment in Scripture which we have ignored too long: *“Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life...”* (Philippians 2:14-16).

The call of this message this morning is that we Christians wake up and realize what is happening in our world and our country. It is time we do much more than shake our heads and say how bad the world is. It is time we write letters and make phone calls. It is time we make our voices heard and our convictions known. It is time we run to warn others of the coming danger. It is not a tornado, literally, but it is coming down upon us just the same. It is time we stop listening to those who say that Christians have no right to become involved, that we should not force our beliefs on others.

To that I say, “They make no pretense about forcing their beliefs on *us*, so why should Christians be relegated to a second-class citizenship with no rights of free speech? And don’t we have The Best News In The History Of The World?”

Martin Niemöller was a German pastor and theologian who was an anti-Communist and was an early supporter of Adolph Hitler. But when Hitler began to assert the power of the state over the church, Niemöller withdrew his support, and became the leader of a group of German clergymen who were opposed to Hitler. In 1937 he was arrested and eventually confined in the concentration camp at Dachau. His crime was "not being enthusiastic enough about the Nazi movement."

Niemöller was released in 1945 by the Allies. When he later visited Dachau, he remembered the sequence of events as Hitler became more and more powerful in his own country. He later wrote these words in his diary:

*First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out--  
because I was not a communist;  
Then they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out--*



*because I was not a socialist;  
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out--  
because I was not a trade unionist;  
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out--  
because I was not a Jew;  
Then they came for me--  
and there was no one left to speak out for me.*

It's no joke. It's time we say enough. It's time we are obedient to Scripture when it comes to praying for those in authority over us. But it's also time we stop bowing down and backing away, pretending that it's not our responsibility.

Are you ready to join me in standing up for the cause of Christ?