

HOW TO SAVE THE WORLD

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James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Last week, our nation commemorated the horrific terrorist attacks that took place twenty years ago on September 11, 2001—attacks which claimed the lives of 3,000 people and changed how we live.

Today, I would like to talk about another profound event which took place in a different September—an event which came terrifyingly close to ending life on this planet. That date was September 26, 1983.

On that day, Stanislav Petrov was at work. Stanislav Petrov was 44 years old. He was a lieutenant colonel in the Soviet Air Defense system. His job on September 26 was as Duty Officer at a secret command center outside of Moscow. At this location, the Soviet military monitored its early warning satellite over the United States. On that day, the alarms sounded. The computers warned that five Minuteman intercontinental ballistic missiles had been launched from a base in America and were headed toward the Soviet Union.

This was 1983 and the Cold War was going strong. The Cold War would continue another eight years until the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union. Tensions between the Soviets and the rest of the world were especially high at this moment because just three weeks earlier, the Soviet air force had shot down Korea Airlines Flight 007. That airplane was a 747 flying from New York City to Seoul. After a stopover in Anchorage, the plane strayed into Soviet airspace at a time when the U.S. was flying an aerial reconnaissance mission. The Soviet air force treated the aircraft as a U.S. spy plane and shot it down with an air-to-air missile. All 269 people on board, including a U.S. Congressman, died.

Given this tense geopolitical environment, on September 26, 1983, it was not implausible that the U.S. could conceivably launch missiles to the USSR.

In the command center outside Moscow, Col. Petrov assessed the computer's warning. It was his job was to telephone his superiors in case of just such an attack. They would then contact the Soviet leader, Yuri Andropov. The result would likely be a retaliatory strike on the U.S. and possibly its allies. If the Soviets launched missiles, the U.S. would see them and launch more. The results would be devastating.

But Col. Petrov did not immediately phone those up the chain of command. He spent at least five minutes analyzing the situation while screens and maps flashed at him and a hundred men stared at him waiting for orders. Eventually, Petrov concluded that the launch reports were a false alarm. His decision was based on

three factors: 1) He did not fully trust the early-warning system. It was new and had been rushed into development and still had bugs. 2) It didn't make sense to him that the U.S. would make an initial strike with only five missiles. It should be a massive assault, not a weak one. And 3), Soviet ground-based radar had not yet identified any incoming missiles. Petrov determined that there were no missiles. And there weren't. Petrov's calm analysis averted catastrophe. He later said that he based his decision on a gut-feeling. It was a good gut.

An investigation later showed that the false alarm was apparently set off when the monitoring satellite interpreted the sun's reflection off the tops of clouds as a missile launch. The computer code would be re-written to correct this error and hopefully prevent the mistake from happening again.¹

Col. Petrov's actions that day were incredibly brave. On the one hand, if he had been wrong, his nation would have been attacked with little chance for retaliation. If he had survived, he would have been a traitor. On the other, if he was correct (and he was), he was disobeying his responsibility to alert his superiors of the attack. He was stuck in a lose/lose situation. And while he was not reprimanded for his actions, he was not praised either. To acknowledge the false alarm would have been embarrassing to the state. Ultimately, they chose to ignore the event.

For the purpose of this sermon, it would be profoundly helpful if I could tell you that Col. Petrov was a committed Christian who read his Bible every day and vowed to be guided by its words. But I have no proof of that. While I can't attest to his faith, I can look at his actions and be inspired by them, for his actions are how a Christian should choose to live.

We find a wonderful parallel between the story of September 26, 1983, and the words from our New Testament's Letter of James. In this letter, the author is addressing a wide audience of Christians and giving them lessons on morality and ethics and Christian living.

Our reading for today begins with what might be viewed as the gist of this letter. It is the question, *Who among you is wise and understanding?* If asked that question, everyone would claim to be wise and to be understanding. That is how we see ourselves. But James then tells those people to put their money where their mouth is. *Show us*, he says, *show us how by your good life that what you do is enacted with a gentleness that emanates from your wisdom.*

This is where I find the first evidence of Col. Petrov in our reading. His actions in 1983 clearly were done with a gentleness that was rooted in wisdom. Col. Petrov didn't seek the violent response, but he pondered and analyzed. And in doing so, he dismissed any *bitter envy* or *selfish ambition* from his heart. The appropriate

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/18/world/europe/stanislav-petrov-nuclear-war-dead.html>

response to the alarm of incoming missiles would be to fight. They fired at us, we get to fire back. That response, according to the Letter of James, would be *earthly*; it would be *unspiritual* and *devilish*. A response like that is plagued with *envy* and *selfish ambition*. In a response like that we will find *disorder and wickedness*. But Col. Petrov acted differently. He acted with wisdom.

But what is wisdom? What does it mean to be wise? Christian wisdom is not just the ability to discern and dispense good advice. Christian wisdom comes *from above*. It is not of this earth. The Letter of James defines Christian wisdom with six characteristics. Christian wisdom is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, it is full of mercy, it is devoid of partiality or hypocrisy. Col. Petrov's actions on that day in 1983 check off all six characteristics. His actions were *pure* in that they weren't polluted by his ego. His actions were *peaceable*. War would have been the safe choice for him but he chose peace. Christian wisdom is *gentle*. Again, Col. Petrov was not drawn towards the promise of conflict. Furthermore, Col. Petrov was *willing to yield*. He was willing to step back even if it meant the Soviet's Cold War adversaries might get the better of them. He was willing to yield. And that is a lesson that may be the hardest for us to hear, to be able to yield, to step back from our position, to give instead of simply digging in our heels. To be a Christian is to be willing to yield. In addition, Col. Petrov was truly *full of mercy*. He didn't demand retaliation. He was willing to take a chance. And lastly, Col. Petrov acted without *a trace of partiality or hypocrisy*. How many of us aren't partial for our favorite team or political party and we allow that partiality to influence our decisions. The Letter of James tells us that if we wish to be wise then we must act fairly without thought for ourselves and our own wants.

Thankfully for us all, Col. Petrov was clearly a person filled with wisdom. In 1983, if he had not fully epitomized all six characteristics as James defines them, our world would be a very different place today.

Being a Christian does not mean just being a good person or appearing to be a good person. Being a Christ-follower means re-writing the code that governs our lives. We have to be better than good; we must be wise and gentle and understanding. We must set aside all pettiness and envy and selfish ambitions. We must submit ourselves to God.

To be a Christ-follower requires courage. We must be brave. We will frequently find ourselves at odds with the devilish desires of the world. We have to stand apart.

In doing so, we may lose notoriety. If we are not drawing attention to ourselves, we may have work quietly with no adulation. Col. Petrov's actions were all but unknown until 1998—15 years later—when Gen. Yuriy Votintsev, the retired commander of Soviet missile defense, published his memoirs. Since then, Col.

Petrov has been recognized in the West and is even the subject of a documentary. Col. Petrov died four years ago in 2017.

It is unlikely that any of us will be in the position to literally save the world like Col. Petrov. But you never know. You never know when some seemingly insignificant decision or action may have far reaching consequences. So therefore, we should live as if every action is momentous, every decision is earth-changing. In our small, everyday actions, if we act as Christ-followers with gentleness and wisdom then we are saving the world a bit at a time.