

BIRTHMARK OF THE BELIEVER: PERSECUTION

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

Matthew 5: 10-12

One of the things that impresses me about Jesus is his honesty. He did not learn his methods from Madison Avenue, nor did he learn them from modern-day preachers. I wonder how you would go about starting a new religion? Let's suppose that you were just a peasant, a nobody, a newcomer, and you were trying to attract people to follow you and to believe in you. I suppose that most of us would try to paint a glorious picture of how beautiful and how easy and pleasant it would be to be our follower. Yet, Jesus Christ did absolutely the opposite.

Jesus was completely honest about what would happen to the people who followed him. Instead of painting a beautiful, glorious picture of what it would be to be one of his disciples, Jesus ~~xxxix~~ talked about persecution. Over and over again, Jesus kept coming back to this theme of suffering and hardship. Some people came to him one day and said, "Master, we will follow thee," and Jesus tried his best to discourage them. He said, "Foxes have holes to sleep in, birds have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head." They became strangely silent after that, and wanted to follow him no more.

Jesus never said following Him was going to be easy; He never said it would be a bed of roses. On the contrary, Jesus said that if you really want to follow Him, "Blessed are you when men shall persecute you." One of the characteristics of a Christlike

disciple is persecution.

Now, this is the only beatitude that Jesus repeated. Did you catch that? I suppose that this was just too much for that group of disciples sitting there that day. Everything else Jesus had said had certainly surprised them and stunned them, but this was just too much! And you'll notice, also, that this is the only beatitude that takes up three verses. Every other beatitude Jesus can just dispatch quickly in one simple statement. I imagine after Jesus made the general statement, "Blessed are they which ^{how} are persecuted for righteousness' sake," he noticed that the disciple's mouths flew open and their eyes grew large. So, in verse eleven he makes it personal and uses "ye" and "you." "Yes, fellows, I'm talking about you." He didn't want his disciples to think that he was merely preaching a sermon. He wanted them to know that this matter of persecution and suffering was to be applied personally to their own lives. If Jesus were to come back today and once again give us the beatitudes, I think he would still have to repeat this final beatitude because we just can't really believe it. ~~It lies beyond the experience of most of us.~~

This idea of suffering and being persecuted ~~is~~ for Jesus' sake lies beyond the experience of most of us. Yet, it seems to be highly significant that he gives more time to this one beatitude than he does to any of the others. Jesus wanted to underline this thought that the final characteristic of a Christian was that he would be persecuted. However, this beatitude doesn't really describe the characteristic of a Christian, but it describes the character of the world in which the Christian lives.

Let's suppose you could find a man who had all these first seven characteristics. He's poor in spirit, he mourns over it, and

he's concerned about it. He hasn't lost the ability to blush, and he knows what it's like to have his heart broken over his own sins. He's meek, he's not always trying to get ahead of everybody, and he's hungry and thirsting, not after power, but after righteousness. He's really a strange fellow. You find him working in an office where everybody else is hungry and thirsting after other things, but he doesn't realize that he's just completely out of step with everything else that's going on. He's pure in heart, and he's a peacemaker. What does the world do when they find a fellow like that? Jesus says that they persecute him. They don't exalt him, they don't applaud him, they don't elect him President of the United States, they don't elect him president of the social club, they don't promote him, they don't advance him. They persecute him.

The type of religion that says that if you love Jesus, everybody will love you just isn't true. It is not taught anywhere in the Bible. Jesus says that if the world finds a boy, girl, man, or woman who is living exactly like Jesus, they will persecute you. I want to say three really simple things about this matter of persecution. I want to discuss the REALITY of it, the REASON for it, and the REACTION to it.

First of all, persecution is real; it is a reality. In that eleventh verse Jesus said, "Blessed are ye WHEN man shall revile you." Jesus did not say, "Blessed are ye IF men shall revile you." Jesus did not say that there is an inside chance, a slight possibility that you might be persecuted. Jesus said that the only doubt about persecution is WHEN it will happen. This persecution is real, and Jesus didn't just say it in this one Scripture.

These things I command you, that ye love one another.

If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you.

If ye were of the world, the world would love ~~it~~ his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep your's also.

John 15:17-20

And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.

Romans 8:17

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

II Cor. 4:17

For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake.

Philippians 1:29

who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church.

Colossians 1:24

That verse simply means that when Jesus suffered on the cross, he left some suffering for us to do.

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you:

But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.

If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye.

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1 Peter 4:12-14

Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

LL Timothy 2:3

Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.

II Timothy 3:12

That last verse is quite a dogmatic statement! ALL. There is no way you can get around it in the Word of God. For me to identify myself with Jesus in trusting faith and believing in Him is synonymous with suffering with Him. But, I can't help thinking, we're NOT being persecuted. Perhaps God just loves us so much and has blessed us so much, because who of us knows what persecution is? I think about those parts of the world where there IS very real persecution

for those who follow Jesus, and I think how much God has blessed us in that He has exempted us from such suffering. Isn't that how we think?

Folks, we have got it exactly reverse. The reason that God is exempting us temporarily---the reason that we are not being persecuted today--is that we are not worthy. Peter and the other apostles rejoiced in Acts 5:41 "that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name." I think God's made a wise decision. Few of us would be able to stick it out. The minute our faith in Jesus begins to inconvenience us a little bit, we're gone.' We're just not made of the stuff that the early Christians were made of. Jesus was perfected, the Bible says, through suffering.

When you and I get to the place where we're right with God enough, where we're worthy enough, God will allow us to be persecuted, because the Bible tells us that special rewards and a special place is given to those who suffer for His name. We have it exactly backwards here in America. We're sitting on the front row on this earth, but we'll be on the back row in glory. All of those ^{poor,} pitiful people who suffered and died for Jesus will be on the front row.

I believe that any time my experience doesn't match the word of God, there's something wrong with my experience. I can't get away from the fact that the Word of God says that all they that live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. I do believe the day will come in our own country when it will cost us something to be a real follower of Jesus. God's Word is going to come true.

In Matthew 5:11 Jesus gives three kinds of persecution that a Christian who follows Jesus will endure. First of all, he said, that they shall revile you. The word REVILE means to disgrace, to dishonor, or to disdain. One of the tactics of the enemy is to try to

dishonor or to discredit a Christian. Have you ever noticed that if a Baptist preacher runs off with a deacon's wife, it makes the headlines? If a bartender down here at Joe's Bar and Grill ran off with somebody's wife, nobody ever said a word about it!

I remember when I was at the Seminary in Fort Worth, the front page of the Fort Worth Press had an article about an incident in Alabama. I was about a pastor in Alabama--a little church noone had ever heard of. Why in the world do you suppose that would make the front page in Fort Worth, Texas? Ah, the world just jumps up and down and claps its hands any time it can discredit the name of Jesus.

The world is going to try to disgrace and dishonor God's people, and do you know who ~~is~~ its greatest colleagues are in this? You Christian folks who are reading this book, because you'll ~~xxx~~ believe anything anybody will tell you about anybody else! Now, I guarantee you tonight that if some sour, cranky, grumbling unChristlike man were to come to you and tell you some filthy story about your Pastor, some of you would disregard the life he has lived for many years and you'd believe it in a minute. Have you ever noticed how eager we are to believe the worst? ~~xx~~

Am I exaggerating? No, I've seen it happen over and over again. I don't care how great the man may be. Perhaps he's a preacher, a deacon, a Sunday School teacher, a husband. I don't care how many years he has lived a life that is immaculate and impeccable. And I don't care how rotten is the fellow who is telling the story. You let somebody--anybody--say anything, anywhere, and half the people will believe it. They'll say, "well, I thought there must have been something like that." The devil's greatest colleagues in reviling and discrediting other people are those of us who are willing to listen to anything ~~xxxxxxx~~ that anybody pulls out.

Yes, if you're a real follower of Jesus Christ, sooner or later, somebody at the office, some kid at school, or somebody in your neighborhood is going to try to discredit you and say something to dishonor you. Not only that, but the next word Jesus uses in verse eleven is persecute. I discovered something new when I studied this word. I had thought persecute means that you get a knife and you poke it at somebody. However, PERSECUTE MEANS to pursue, to follow and track, and to put to flight. Isn't that strange? Persecution is when the world is on your trail all the time, following you, and watching for you to make a mistake.

Do you remember on the Sabbath day one time when Jesus and his disciples were taking a shortcut through a cornfield, and they got hungry and his disciples began to pluck the ears of corn? All of a sudden, the Scripture says, the Pharisees appeared out of nowhere and accused Jesus because his disciples were picking corn on the Sabbath. I read that Scripture for years before I asked myself this question: what was a bunch of Pharisees doing in a cornfield on the Sabbath? I'll tell you what they were doing! They were persecuting Jesus! They were following him, never losing sight of him, keeping their eye on him because they thought that sooner or later he was going to make a slip.

Friends, that's exactly what the world does with you. The minute you open your mouth and let the world know that you're a Christian, immediately they begin to watch you. That fellow you're witnessing to is just hoping so much that you'll slip and say that word you ought not to say, or perhaps tell an off-color joke, because that will discredit and discount every word you've said. It will make him feel at ease in his sin.

Then when that fails, Jesus says, "They shall say all manner of

of evil against you falsely for my sake." That's the last resort. when everything else fails--when they follow you and follow you and spy upon you and can;t find anything to accuse you of--they're going to make something up. All they that live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~

Number two, let's discuss the reason for this persecution. Why? Jesus says ".for righteousness' sake" and "for my sake." He doesn't say, "Blessed are you when you're persecuted for a cause or a doctrine." If you have some cause--perhaps political-- or some truth you're trying to push down everybody's throat, and somebody persecute you, don't quote this verse of Scripture. Jesus isn't saying that. He's saying you're blessed if you're persecuted because you are righteous in your life. You see, this beatitude sums up the preceding seven. Jesus says that you're blessed when you're persecuted because you're the type of person described in the first seven beatitudes.

If I'm like Jesus, I'll be persecuted. Why did they persecute Jesus? They didn't persecute Jesus because he was good. There were alot of good people in the world. They didn't persecute Jesus because he was good, but because he was different. The world accepts goodness. The world doesn't persecute us today because we're not different. we're just like they are. We're good--not living immoral lives, stealing, or lying--but we're so much like them.

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The world cannot stand someone who is different. Jesus wouldn't think the way they though. He wouldn't live the way they lived. He wouldn't worship the way they worshipped. Jesus was only interested in one thing, and that was doing the Father's will. He wasn;t trying to impress anybody, and he wasn;t trying to win a

popularity contest. He wouldn't sacrifice the truth of God to soothe the feelings of fellow man. He was consistent with God and he put God above everything else. He was different, and they couldn't stand him. They had to do one of two things. They had to follow him or kill him, and they chose to kill him. When the time comes that you and I are like Jesus, and we love like Jesus, and we speak like Jesus, and we seek the Father's will like Jesus, we will be persecuted.

Finally, let's discuss our REACTION to persecution. How do you react to it? Jesus has the answer in verse twelver, "Rejoice and be exceeding glad." Do you know what the word rejoice means? I'm glad the Lord wrote the New Testament in Greek because it's such an expressive language. The word REJOICE means to jump up and down with joy. Just leap with joy when your Christianity is going to cost you something.

I never will forget when I was in college, I received the church paper from an Oklahoma church. In the Pastor's column, one week were ~~xxxxxxx~~ these words: "I want to thank everybody who braved the rain last Sunday to come to church." Through the years, I have never forgotten that little expression--braved the rain. Isn't that great! Wouldn't that look good in the book of Acts? I have images of fearless ~~xxxxxxx~~ ^{Christians} taking their lives into their hands. Can you imagine waking up on Sunday morning, looking out the window, their hearts failing them at the sight of rain? But here they are willing to sacrifice. They count not their lives hear to themselves, so they get the umbrella and run three feet to the car, and at great risk, they drive three blocks to the church and run inside--braving the rain. That's about the extent of our present-day sacrifice--coming to church in bad weath. We pat ourselves on the back if we brave the rain. That ought to go in Habreus 11:37: " They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were

empted, were slain with the sword: ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~"
and, oh yes, that twentieth-century bunch braved the rain.

I don't know about you, but I have it so easy in following Jesus. If it ever does get inconvenient, nobody really expects me to put myself out. The very minute your faith in Jesus Christ begins to cost you something, that's your chance to be more like Jesus. ↗

Also, rejoice because you're in good company. when you're persecuted "for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you."

Where is your point of disobedience in your life? Is it a matter or money? Is it a clean life at school? Is it a relationship with a neighbor? I think this point of disobedience is there because you're not willing to count all things lost for Jesus' sake. Are you afraid that obedience will cost you something? I want God to work in my life--and I don't have a persecution complex and I'm not looking for persecution--but I sure would like to be in the stands in the gallery of the prophets. I sure would like to be counted among those whom God thought worthy to suffer, for blessed are they who are persecuted.