

The Teachings of Jesus

Blessed Are the Persecuted

Matthew 5:10-12

Introduction

The Starved Rock Lock and Dam is located at the Illinois Waterway Visitor Center, approximately two miles east of Route 178 in Ottawa, Illinois. My wife and I took an afternoon this summer to go up and see it. It's pretty impressive to see one of those big barges enter the lock at one water level and then exit at another. The Starved Rock lock and dam is one of eight between Lake Michigan and the Mississippi River. The Illinois Waterway, as it is called, was finished in 1933 to make the shallow Illinois River usable for commercial traffic.

In a sense the beatitudes are like those locks. A ship remains in each water lock until the water has raised to a level high enough to float the ship on to the next lock. The locks are an interlocking system and ships must pass through all of them in sequence to go from Lake Michigan to the mighty Mississippi and all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. The beatitudes are like that. They are interlocking. The believer begins a journey of faith that is marked by spiritual poverty. However, when he emerges from the process, he is so spiritually in tune with Christ that he becomes the persecuted.

A person comes to God hunting for authentic, genuine faith and winds up in the end being the one hunted for his faith. What accounts for this transformation? You can explain it only by knowing that the goal of discipleship is not persecution, but result certainly is!

Let's read one more time, the beatitudes of Matthew 5 before we study this final lesson on the persecuted.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Persecution is a part of Christianity. Christians have always been persecuted. In an article called "Praying for a Miracle" written by Brian Moynahan that appeared in the "Times Online" website on March 27, 2007, he writes, "It's not just Muslims and Jews who have faced persecution in recent years. An estimated 200m Christians in 60 countries are now suffering increasing victimization."

According to the World Christian Encyclopedia, 2.2 billion people lived in 79 countries under significant restrictions on their religious freedom in 1980. 60% of all Christians live in these countries. And 16% (224 million) of all Christians live in countries where there is severe state interference and harassment.

In his book, *God Seekers*, Richard Schmidt says that 2/3^{rds} of all Christian martyrs have come in the twentieth century.

It seems the deeper your faith and the greater your love for the Master, the more hostile this world becomes towards you. Too often our concept of faith in Christ involves a break between the first seven beatitudes and the dreaded number eight! We never dream that the blessing of God upon us will produce hatred and animosity towards us. But the connection of this eighth blessing to the preceding ones is central to Jesus teaching. You might think that developing followers who considered themselves poor, mourners, meek, hungry, merciful, pure, and peacemakers would result in weak-kneed, namby-pamby individuals so filled with "holy Joe" piety that no one in his right mind would even begin to take them seriously let alone throw a stick at them. It is handling persecution that changes everything!

I. The Persecuted

Persecution is not the goal, but without exception those with genuine faith in Christ will face persecution. Persecution is the result of a profound commitment to Christ. The Apostle Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:12, "Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." You might say, "But, who in the world would want to persecute little old me?" Well, that's precisely the point. No one will persecute the little old you – but the new you in dedicated, active faith will become Satan's target.

John writes in Chapter 15 verses 18-20 "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. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also."

William Barclay writes, "The penalties which a Christian had to suffer were terrible beyond description. All the world knows of the Christians who were flung to the lions or burned at the stake; but these were kindly deaths. Nero wrapped the Christians in pitch and set them alight, and used them as living torches to light his gardens. He sewed them in the skins of wild animals and set his hunting dogs upon them to tear them to death. They were tortured on the rack; they were scraped with pincers; molten lead was poured hissing upon them; red hot brass plates were affixed to the tenderest parts of their bodies; eyes were torn out; parts of their bodies were cut off and roasted before their eyes; their hands and feet were burned while cold water was poured over them to enlighten the agony."

These were the conditions for early Christians. But in many parts of the world today, believers are suffering just as much. In China millions of members of house churches are considered outlaws and criminals because their churches are not registered with the atheistic government.

Nina Shea writes in her book "The Lion's Den", It appears that anywhere from eleven million to one hundred million Chinese Christians belong to these underground churches. Many are arrested, imprisoned, and sent to the laogai, the Chinese word for "reform through hard labor camps" (Nina Shea, *The Lion's Den* , [Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997], 58).

Many Christians in China are engaged in this "reform," which produces cheap products for the Americans. Chinese religious persecution intensified in 1996. In the Moslem country of Sudan, Christians are given several options: They can either convert to Islam, flee, be killed, raped, or be taken as slaves. As a result, there are many slaves in the country who were Christians. Even many children of Christians are taken and sold for fifteen dollars to serve in people's homes. So the persecution of Christians is not just ancient history. It is alive and well in the 21st century. The life of Christians in China, Sudan, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Egypt, Nigeria, Cuba, and Laos is extremely hard. In fact, in some countries, like Saudi Arabia, citizens of the United States who are living in Saudi Arabia cannot even worship Jesus Christ freely. It is against the law.

The forms of persecution will vary with circumstances. Our culture has not yet resorted to fire and dungeons, confiscation, exile and death, as many other nations have. But the sinister way political and media speak against Christianity may well be just as sinful as it was to murder one in Christ's time.

The evangelist Charles Finney wrote, "The spirit of persecution is the same in every age and climate. The difference in its form of manifestation by no means lessens its guilt. Change of circumstances necessitates a change in the form of persecution, yet many only heighten the persecutor's guilt. Men often deceive themselves, supposing they have not the spirit of a persecutor, when it is only due to circumstances that they are not burning their Christian neighbors at the stake. The restraints of public opinion change the form of persecution, yet by no means expel its spirit. Enmity against God is the spirit of murder against God's people. In ancient days the wicked persecuted unto blood because, having the will, they had also the power. Yet by reason of their darkness, their guilt may have been less than some of you incur when you only speak against God's people."

Why are Christians persecuted? And from whom will this persecution come? When you examine the life of Christ you see at least five sources:

First, persecution can come from your own family. That can happen simply because you accept God's plan of salvation for your life. For those of you raised in a Christian home that may have no meaning, but for some of you, you know exactly what I mean. But Jesus approves of your new life and faith even if your family does not.

Secondly, your friends may persecute you. Jesus home town rejected Him and His friends at one point in his ministry said he was crazy. Mark 3:21. Your friends may not persecute you if they are all believers, but some of you have paid a price for taking a stand for Christ. In fact, it is the fear of losing friends and alienating family that keeps a lot of Christians from witnessing their faith! Christians don't go out looking to be persecuted! They go out to serve and share the joy of Christ in their life wanting others to experience the difference they have. But that kind of devotion makes others uncomfortable. The light within them exposed the darkness within others. John writes, "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." John 3:19.

A third source of persecution came from other religious people. You would think that people who call themselves Christians would actually behave like Christians. And yet religious persecution is one of the most heinous crimes

of all. Many true believers are misunderstood, verbally maligned, and ridiculed by people who call themselves Christian but feel justified to harass and persecute someone because they feel convicted themselves or they just don't agree that person's particular doctrines.

Another source of opposition comes from government. I've already mentioned the many believers who are suffering the worldwide persecution of Christians.

And the fifth source of persecution, Jesus gave the title of "the world". The world is where we live and work and have our associations. Living for Christ in your world can definitely cause you to experience persecution, rejection, lies and slander. But those who endure this persecution Jesus says, "Rejoice! For yours is the Kingdom of Heaven."

II. The Kingdom of Heaven

This however, raises a question: In order to rejoice and be glad in the suffering of persecution, don't you have to believe that the suffering itself enlarges your reward in heaven? And if the same reward in heaven could be obtained without suffering, wouldn't that make suffering useless?

What gave Rowland Taylor and Bishop Ridley and John Bradford the impulse to kiss the stakes at which they were burned? What moved Obadiah Holmes, after ninety lashes turned his back to jelly for Jesus, to say to the magistrates, "You have struck me with roses"? Why did Thomas Hardcastle say that persecution is "a precious season of grace"? I think the answer must be that the more your faith is tested through suffering, the greater will be your reward.

Matthew 19:29 seems to teach this. "And every one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life". We see this especially in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18, "For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen."

The Apostle Paul knew an awful lot about suffering. Having seen it from both sides, he says that affliction "prepares" or "brings about" an eternal weight of glory. Jesus teaches us to rejoice and be glad in the midst of suffering for righteousness and for Jesus, because that very suffering will receive a very great compensation and a very great reward. Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven!

III. The Blessing of the Persecuted

In Romans 8:16 Paul writes, "The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: 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. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

Hebrews Chapter 12 verse 1-4 records, Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.

Read Hebrews 11:36-38 and read how by faith they suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated—of whom the world was not worthy!

Listen to Paul's words concerning Moses in Hebrews 11:26, "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward."

Read the testimonies of those who have given their all for Christ in Foxe's Book of Martyrs.

Consider the last letter of Vanya Moiseyev, the 20 year old soldier in the Soviet Red army. He had been tortured for some time for his faith in Christ. On July 16, 1972, they went too far, and he died. On July 15 he wrote to his brother Vladimir, Don't tell our parents everything. Just tell them, "Vanya wrote me a letter and writes that Jesus Christ is going into battle. This is a Christian battle, and he doesn't know whether he will be back." I desire that all of you, dear friend, young and old, remember this one verse. Revelation 2:10—"Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." (M. Grant, *Vanya*, pp. 175f.)

Let the battle cry of evangelism at Crossroads Chapel be like those of the martyred missionary Jim Elliot who said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Conclusion

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. *Matthew 5:10-12*

In the face of persecution, Jesus' followers have two reasons to rejoice and be glad. First, they know that God rewards those who suffer for their faith, and that their reward will indeed be great in heaven. ... The second reason Jesus' followers can rejoice in tribulation is that they stand in good company: *In the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you*, Jesus says. *Richard B. Gardner, Matthew*

John R. W. Stott writes in *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, "It may seem strange that Jesus should pass from peacemaking to persecution, from the work of reconciliation to the experience of hostility. Yet however hard we may try to make peace with some people, they refuse to live at peace with us. Not all attempts at reconciliation succeed."

At the end of the Beatitudes that is what Jesus says. His warning is to stand faithful and not allow yourself to get blown about by the ideologies of the world. We have only one Master, and serving him is like serve no other! It is doing His will that governs our dealings with the world, which means the world has no right to order us around. And if the world chooses to penalize us for this, that is a price we are prepared to pay.

Clarence Jordan wrote, "ONE WONDERS why Christians today get off so easily. Is it because unchristian Americans are that much better than unchristian Romans, or is our light so dim that the tormentor can't see it? What are the things we do that are worth persecuting?"
Clarence Jordan, Sermon on the Mount