

"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.¹² "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

As we come to the final beatitude we are reminded again of how contrary to the world the Christian normal life is as Jesus has described it.

We are favored of God when we know persecution because of righteousness, when we are spoken about in an evil manner and we are to rejoice because we are identified with the prophets of God who have preceded us.

Jesus said, Mt 23:35 so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous **Abel** to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. And Heb 11:4 By faith **Abel** offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.

Persecution is a normal part of the Christian life and not to experience it in some way is abnormal and means that you must not be hungering and thirsting after righteousness very much because you are not showing mercy and acting out of a pure heart nor are you doing much to be a peacemaker. In other words there is very little of the Christian normative of being a son of God that is very evident in your life.

2 Tim.3:12 Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.
life.

How could Paul make such a sweeping statement? "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." He makes it on the basis of a deep conviction about the nature of Christianity and the nature of the sinfulness of man. He is convinced that there is such a tension between the message and way of life of Christians on the one hand and the mindset and way of life of the world on the other that conflict is inevitable.

On Thursday at our pastor's meeting we prayed for a family called the Grants who are in Pakistan with an organization that gets Christians into the country with legitimate business backgrounds and then works with the Christians and with non-believers, which is illegal and very dangerous. This family has been confronted by a false Christian who joined their group and gave them an ultimatum. Get out of the country or I will expose you and your Christian ministry and you most likely will be killed if you do not leave. I do not believe that they have left yet.

A number of years ago a Chinese house pastor was arrested and put in prison.

This still goes on today.

While he would sit among the prisoners he would try to pray and sing as a testimony and was met with great opposition. However, even the cruel guards whom he attempted to share the gospel with could not break his spirit. So they had a plan. Knowing he was older and not in the

best of health they decided to give him latrine duty. The latrine receptacle was a shallow tunnel underneath the prison cell floors. The toilets were holes in the floor and the tunnel needed to be cleaned regularly.

They opened the hatch to the tunnel and told him to go to work and to be sure the place was spotless after each time he cleaned it.

The waste was from knee to waist high on a regular basis.

Every day after he cleaned the tunnel the pastor would emerge with a smile on his face and a very thankful attitude.

This fascinated some of the prisoners and annoyed the guards.

They began to ask him why his attitude was so pleasant after being exposed to such disgusting circumstances.

He answered by telling him that he knew he was put in the hole to persecute him and therefore he knew that he was being blessed by God because he must be demonstrating the righteousness of God in his life.

But even more happily was the fact that down in the latrine tunnel beneath the concrete floor, there was nothing but silence and there he could meditate, and sing and praise God in prayer while he was doing the filthy work that was meant to break his spirit. This place became a spiritual retreat for this pastor. And of course, there were a few new converts from the prisoners and the guards that entered into the kingdom of heaven by the means of this mans perseverance and preaching the gospel by the grace of God.

So these words of Jesus about persecution are relevant for today not only because millions of Christians in our global village are being persecuted for their faith this very day, but also because to one degree or another all of you who are in dead earnest about putting God first in your work and home and school and leisure will receive some form of opposition sooner or later. And none of us knows when our freedoms may cease or when we may be called by God to go to a dangerous place or take a stand here that will cause many to dislike us.

It is because of Christ and that we demonstrate His righteousness that we will be persecuted.

He taught about persecution more than once.

John 15:18-20 18 ¶ "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. 19 "If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they **persecuted** Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also.

So what we learn from this is that true righteousness—the righteousness that surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20) a righteousness that is of a different origin

and demonstrates itself in mercy, purity of heart and peacemaking—always involves a relationship with Jesus. True righteousness is not done for its own sake. It is done for Jesus' sake. The mercy and the purity and the peacemaking of a disciple of Jesus comes from Jesus ("without me you can do nothing," John 15:5) and is done for the honor of Jesus. It's this attachment to Jesus that gives our righteousness its distinct character.

So we can see why a life devoted to righteousness or godliness will be persecuted or reviled or spoken against.

-- If you cherish chastity, your life will be an attack on people's love for free sex.

-- If you embrace temperance, your life will be a statement against the love of alcohol.

-- If you pursue self-control, your life will make others guilty about things like excess eating.

-- If you live simply and happily, you will show the folly of luxury.

-- If you walk humbly with your God, you will expose the evil of pride.

-- If you are punctual and thorough in your dealings, you will lay open the inferiority of laziness and negligence.

-- If you speak with compassion, you will make the cynical uncomfortable.

-- If you are earnest, you will make the flippant look flippant instead of clever.

-- And if you are spiritually minded you will expose the worldlimindedness of those around you.

The world loves darkness but as we will study next week we are called to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. How interesting that these are the things Jesus teaches after telling us of the persecution that awaits us for being light and salt.

And yet even as Paul understood all of these things to be momentary light afflictions compared to the glory that God has waiting for us in the consummated kingdom Jesus says great will be our reward for knowing persecution.

The afflictions of this world can only seem light when we are truly heavenly minded. Where our hearts are is where our treasure lies.

Is your heart fixed on the blessed hope of Christ and all the fulfillment of His promises - especially those that are waiting for us when we are with Him, for those are the promises that are of eternal value.

Not only Paul but many others are known to have looked for the promises that await the people of God. Turn often to 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!

The world was not worthy of them, they were persecuted but great is their reward in heaven. We have all of this scripture that assures us that God will see us through these things and yet what is our attitude like when someone insults us or falsely says evil things about us. Most of the time how quick we are to retaliate and show how insensitive we are to the truths of the Word of God. How can this be?

It is because we do not hide God's Word in our heart, because too many times the sermons we hear go in one ear and out the other because we make no real attempt to pray after a sermon and ask God to work the truth we need to know into our hearts. We do not take the time to review what was preached when we are home during the week or discuss it with our families or even worse - maybe call the pastor and ask for some clarification if we not sure about what we heard.

We are sustained in the temporal life for the eternal life by the Word of God.

January 11, 2006

The Voice of the Martyrs

Not all Christians were able to celebrate the birth of Jesus in peace last December, as religious hatred and violence continues to escalate.

On Christmas morning at 10:30 a.m., 200 police officers and Religious Affairs Bureau officials drove up in 17 marked vehicles to a gathering of 210 Christians celebrating the birth of Christ. They proceeded to raid the service taking place inside a rented commercial building located in Ma Na Si County in Xinjiang Autonomous Region. As 12 of the church leaders were arrested half an hour later, police seized private property of the Christians including a van, a car, a video camera, a piano, 80 Bibles, 230 new towels and all the food for their celebration. After entering the facility with their search warrant, police declared the Christmas service an "illegal religious gathering." Police released seven of the 12 arrested Christian leaders the following midnight. The other five are still incarcerated at Ma Na Si County Detention Center, including 54-year-old Pastor Guo Xianyao, Ms. Wang Ximei (54), Ms. Zhou Bin (50), Ms. Lu Jianzhen (47) and Ms. Wu Haifang (28). An eyewitness reports that Pastor Guo was receiving beatings from police officers while in custody. In addition to their abuse and incarceration, each leader must pay a fine and be fingerprinted.

Christmas services came to an early close in several other nations in 2005.

A Christmas Eve service at Nachalat Yeshua Messianic Congregation in Beersheba, Israel was stopped as over 300 Orthodox Jews showed up to demonstrate. Many entering the church beat Christians and destroyed property while overturning tables and chairs. The mob outside the building yelled at one Christian woman trying to enter that Christians were Nazis, and that she deserved a bullet through her head. Meanwhile, Christians were denied entrance to Christmas services in both India and Sri Lanka.

In Bangladesh, the Christmas season is a time of heightened security, and thankfully so. Because of increased surveillance, two bombs planted in a school compound were uncovered without incident.

On December 7, five churches were demolished near Jakarta, Indonesia. One more Christian church was set ablaze in Manado the next night. Beth Eden Protestant Church was set on fire by unidentified attackers, severely damaging the structure. According to Asia News, Pastor Stephen Liow received phone calls by militants threatening arson for several months prior to the incident. Suffering at the hands of militant Muslims regularly accompanies Christmas for Indonesian Christians. Because of this terrorism, thousands of police are put on heightened alert during this time of the year. One spokesman declared, "Churches and other worship buildings have become our top priority to secure."

In Eritrea, Christmas raids have purged up to 150 Christians. Release Eritrea reports that police in the Eritrean capital of Asmara have conducted several raids targeting evangelical Christian business owners on and around Christmas day. Included in the city-wide sting were Roma Music Shop, Gazzella Shoe Factory and Beilul Photographic Studio, as well as many other Christian-owned businesses. The purges saw officers arresting business owners and staff before closing down their establishments. Numerous other Christians have also been reported missing from their homes, places of employment and the streets. This came after 20 Christians were arrested earlier in December during a previous raid. A contact for Release Eritrea stated, "This Christmas, many people are celebrating their freedom in different churches around the world for the birth of Jesus, but for the Eritrean Christians, this is a dark day." Another Eritrean brother in Christ was quoted, "Let the world know what is happening in this suffocated nation without press and democracy. Many families are in danger. Please pray for us." About 1,900 Christians are currently imprisoned in Eritrea for their faith.

After leading his congregation in a Christmas service on December 22 in the village of Heuysiak, in the Phaksan district of Laos, Pastor Aroun Voraphom was tortured and his throat slashed before his family found his lifeless body in a creek, according to Christian Aid. He was waylaid on his way home, but the government claims that this was a robbery and not connected to his Christian faith—an assertion that is highly disputed.

The Christmas season has also been a time of unrest for Christians in India. New Life Fellowship's worship service in Ponda, India came to a close on December 18 as 20 militant Hindus stormed the church brandishing iron rods, chains and sticks. They chased the 80 congregants away as they destroyed church property and dragged Pastor Tellis to the police station for "disturbing the peace." The pastor had previously been falsely accused in the presence of six officers, but he was not charged. Police now have six people in custody in connection with the church raid.

Calling Pastor Yesupadam out from a prayer meeting in Hyderabad, India on December 3rd, seven members of the RSS radical Hindu organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh beat him and took him to a police station, where 20 other members were waiting. They falsely accused him of forcing a Hindu to convert to Christianity. Police called him a traitor to the Indian people, as one officer at the station had these words for the pastor: "Did your mother

conceive you through an English man or Telugu man? Are you a Telugu man? Are you an Indian? If you desire to live, stop preaching about Jesus Christ. You know people are killing pastors in the city but still you do not learn anything.” The station’s sub-inspector commented that Christians had become a serious headache. While in police custody, RSS members tried to imprint the mark of Hindu devotion (a talik) to Yesupadam’s forehead. After refusing the emblem, the group threatened to kill him and harm his family for not returning to Hinduism as the police stood by. Christians arriving at the police station to aid the pastor were told that they would be killed if they continued to pray. Yesupadam was later released, but his church services the next day were cancelled, due to continued threats.

In Himachal Pradesh state of northern India, after 60 Christians received death threats for not returning to the Hindu faith on November 16th, their church was seized and converted into a Hindu temple, complete with idols of Hindu gods. This happened weeks just weeks before Christmas, according to a December 12 Gospel for Asia report, and local authorities have backed this action against Christians. Pastor Ramesh Masih Bhatti and his family were forced from their 25-year residence, which was used as the church meeting place. This is part of a large campaign set to force Christians to deny Christ for Hinduism.

A Nigerian pastor was falsely accused of kidnapping a Christian convert from Islam. Pastor Zacheous Habu Bu Ngwenche was given until the end of December to return Bature Suleimanu Idi from hiding or face incarceration. Compass Direct announced on December 12 that this is the second time Muslims kidnapped the new Christian (their first abduction was in September) in their attempts to reconvert him. When the pastor reported the abduction, police detained him for seven days, which is the amount of time it took Christians to gather enough money to post his bail. Even though Pastor Zacheous and Idi were released after their first detention because the police ruled that the new Christian converted voluntarily, the pastor can still be detained for the latest kidnapping, as Idi is still missing.

In Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, Greater Grace Protestant Church was banned from meeting at a state-owned building that they legally rented from a geological institution. It was reported by Forum 18 on December 9 that they had only met four times before the Ministry of State Security pressured city officials to stop their gatherings. This was enacted without any written statements. The decision is expected to be appealed by the church members through the Justice Ministry.

Look to the prophets! Look to the martyrs! Whatever you must do to get your heart in heaven and off the world, do it! Otherwise you will not be able to obey the command of our Lord, "Rejoice and be glad in persecution, for great is your reward in heaven."

And hear the words of the martyr Jim Elliot:

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Finally - I quote from John Piper – “If someone should ask whether having our heart in heaven will make us useless on earth, the answer is given by Jesus in the very next paragraph of the Sermon on the Mount. People who have their hearts so much in heaven that they fear

no man but rejoice in persecution—such radically free and joyful people are the "salt of the earth" and "the light of the world"!!!!

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