

# The blessings of persecution

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[ 0 : 00 ] According to St. Matthew, chapter 5, at verse 10. Matthew's Gospel, the fifth chapter, at the 10th verse. It is written, Jesus said, 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 prosecute you, and shall say all men are evil against you personally for my sake. Be right and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so persecuted they the prophets that were before you.

Well, in our study of the Beatitudes, we come tonight to the eighth and final Beatitude. Blessed are they that are persecuted. And you notice that there are two interesting and unusual features about this last Beatitude.

The Beatitudes all follow similar structure. Blessed don't those be called such and such. So this one is extended. We have the Beatitude itself, in the vast term, following the style of the previous Beatitudes, and then we have an extension to it.

We have a commentary on it. We have a commentary on it, that Jesus gives us, which is not found with the earlier ones. Not only is it extended, it's also personalized. Jesus says, Blessed are the poor for theirs, blessed are the meek for theirs, and so on.

[ 1 : 43 ] But here he sums it up by saying, Blessed are you. And he brings it right home to his hearers.

Perhaps this Beatitude seems particularly remote to you. Perhaps you think, Ah, persecution, yes.

We are talking about Bible times. We are talking about the apostles in the early days of the church. We are talking about church history, the times of the Reformation.

And so, we are talking, perhaps, in more recent days of some of the things that went on in eastern Europe, before the Iron Curtain came down. But you don't get that nowadays. You certainly don't get it in Camberton. This is something remote. This is something academic.

It doesn't have the same message to bring to us, as some of the earlier Beatitudes did.

[ 2 : 48 ] personalizes it in this way ought to be a reminder and a warning to us that there's an emphasis in it, there's a significance in it which we cannot escape or avoid.

And if this we said so often in this series, if these Beatitudes are characteristics of the life of discipleship, if these are marks of the Christian, then this is not something very revolved. This is something which concerns every one of us who profess for the name of Christ.

So perhaps we ought to look at it more carefully and ask ourselves, is this something very apparent to me? Or is this something which refers to me?

The first thing I want to look at with you tonight is the meaning of persecution. What is it that our Lord is addressing here?

Well persecution implies suffering. Not any suffering, not every suffering, but suffering we are told for the sake of righteousness. Verse 10, because of me. Verse 11.

[ 4 : 19 ] Jesus is talking about suffering which Christians experience not because they have some physical infirmity, or not because of their particular unfortunate situation in life, perhaps, but because they're Christians, because they belong to the Lord. And in verse 11, the Lord expands the understanding of the term.

He speaks of, blessed are you, when men shall revile you, when men shall insult you. Persecution, whatever it is, involves insult. It involves people making fun of us. People laughing at us.

Why? Because we are Christians. Remember the experience of David. Psalm 69. Those that sit at the gate mock me, he said, and I am the song of the drunkard.

Why? Because, verse 9 of that Psalm, zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall upon me.

Remember the insults that were poured out in John the Baptist. John the Baptist came neither eating nor drinking wine, and you say, he is a demon.

[ 5 : 55 ] Even our Lord himself was objected to insults. John 8, 48. Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan? You couldn't insult a Jew much worse than that. Well, you could. You are a Samaritan and demon possessed.

If there's anything worse than being a Samaritan, you're just being demon possessed. And they could cut in as well. But, persecution can involve insults. Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you. And the word persecute itself means to pursue.

And Jesus is saying, blessed are you when you are persecuted, when you are suffering, when you are pursued, when you are hunted. Like David was. Like a passage in the mountain. When you are involved in physical suffering. When there are people who are out to get you.

To make life awkward for you. Because of your Christian profession. Lust of social privileges. Imprisonment. Death itself. Remember the testimony of the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians chapter 11.

He says there at verse 23, speaking of his own personal experience. His own personal sufferings. He says, I am, I have worked much harder than these others. Have been imprisoned more frequently. Been plagued more severely. And been exposed to death again and again.

[ 7 : 33 ] Five times I received from the Jews the 40 lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked.

I spent a night and a day in the open sea. I have been constantly in the mood. So on. For the sake of the gospel. Persecution involves, can involve, that kind of suffering too. And then Jesus says, All manner of evil against you firstly. All kinds of false accusations. For the sake of the gospel.

Not just insults. Nasty statements that people make to our pieces. But untruthful slanders. That they spread about us. Behind our backs.

We may not have been persecuted. As the Apostle Paul does. We may not know what it was to go through these traumatic experiences that he went through.

But we may not know what it was to go through these traumatic experiences that he had been taken aside by one of his superiors. But we may not know what it was to go through these traumatic experiences that he had been taken aside by one of his superiors. But we may not know what it was to go through these traumatic experiences that he had been taken to the police. But we may not know what it was to go through these traumatic experiences that he had been taken to the police. But we may have been subjected to this kind of persecution. Even in Campbellton. I remember a Nariak officer telling us years ago. A Christian man. That he had been taken aside by one of his superiors. And told him that there were no chances of promotion for him. Because of his refusal to become involved in the drunken socializing that went on in the officer's mess of his unit.

[ 8 : 59 ] Go and join in the fun. You want to be promoted. But we may not know what it was to go through these traumatic experiences that he had been taken aside by one of his superiors. And told him that there were no chances of promotion for him. Because of his refusal to become involved in the drunken socializing that went on in the officer's mess of his unit.

Go and join in the fun. You want to be promoted. We know here of nurses. Who have conscientious objections to abortion.

Given a hard time by their colleagues. Because although they are a liberty of conscience and aren't required to participate in abortion. The fact that they are withdraw from that means that other people have extra work to do.

And that doesn't make them any more popular. Or the other day of a school girl. Passed by her teacher as a religious instruction teacher at school.

Because she took a stand for Jesus Christ. And her views were hostile to the views of her teacher. And these are things which happen. And happen all around us.

[ 10 : 09 ] It may be that things like that have happened to you. And if so this is what Jesus means. God blessed are you when you are persecuted.

Do you know anything about persecution like this? Has anyone made life difficult for you because you are a Christian? Have you ever been laughed at because of your beliefs?

Or even because you go to church? If not, why not? Is it because your faith is so passive and so quiet that no one else notices it that it offends no one?

What kind of impression does your faith and mine make on the world? And then secondly, let's think about the inevitability of persecution.

This is something which is part and parcel of the Christian life. No lust and poverty of spirit and hunger and thirst for righteousness and purity of heart and these various other things that we have been looking at.

[ 11 : 19 ] That's some persecution of some kind. Whatever its measure, whatever its degree is inevitable if we are leading faithful Christian lives.

Christ, so the old Puritan, Christ died to take away the curse from us, yet not to take away the cross from us. And persecution is inevitable for the Christian believer.

It's inevitable first of all because God has appointed it. Remember what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians chapter 3. We sent Timothy, our brother, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith so that no one will be unsettled by these trials, these persecutions.

You know quite well that we were destined for that. If we are persecuted for the sake of the gospel, it's first of all because God has appointed it. It's not the result of chance.

It's not our bad luck. And it's certainly not a result of our sin. It's not the consequence of human activity. But it's God fulfilling His purpose in our lives and bringing us blessing.

[ 12 : 32 ] Of which more later. If you and I are called upon to suffer for Christ in this way, we may draw encouragement from the fact that God has appointed us.

And that He controls both the extent of the suffering and the degree of the suffering. Our enemies, those who persecute us, are in His hands and are able to do no more than He permits.

Remember the words of Jesus to Pilate when He stood before Him at the seat of judgment. You would have no power over me were it not given you from the back.

God is appointed. And secondly, persecution is inevitable because Christ has fought for a while. Notice the placing, the context of this beatitude.

It follows, blessed are the peacemakers. And we said last week when we were looking at that beatitude that people everywhere were looking for peace. But when it comes to the beat, you and I know only too well that peacemakers aren't the most popular people.

[ 13 : 51 ] But those who seek peace, those who seek to promote peace, may not find everyone anxiously waiting to receive it. In our experiences as Christians as we seek to bring others to know peace with God through Christ, or to introduce harmony into their personal relationships, we find very often we meet not appreciation and gratitude, but resentment and resistance.

And our Lord Jesus is always frighteningly realistic. He doesn't hold out false hopes for His people. He tells us quite clearly what it's going to be like.

And He doesn't kid us. And we are nowhere promised in the scriptures, by Jesus least of all, that our Christian life will be an easy ride into heaven.

Rather He promises that all the people suffered will be suffered by His people too. The world hates you, said Jesus, John 15, 18.

Keep in mind that it hated me first. You belong to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you don't belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That's why the world hates you.

[ 15 : 13 ] If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent you.

And so, Jesus tells, there at the last supper, tells His disciples very clearly what it is that they are to expand.

And He tells us the same. And thirdly, persecution is inevitable because our lives invite it.

All that is godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. Our lives invite it because our lives are different. Christian lives are or should be different from other people.

And people don't like those that are different. People don't like non-conformities. We actually tend to conform to the Lord. Not to do so makes us feel insecure and threatened and not very sure of ourselves, doesn't it?

[ 16 : 23 ] We are the Christians, they knew what it was to be non-conformities. They knew what it was to refuse to acclaim the Roman Emperor as a god.

To say, Caesar is Lord. Because for them there is only one Lord. And that was Jesus. They refused to eat meals.

Where a prayer has offered, grace to say if you like, to a pagan god. They kept themselves very much to themselves.

Especially those who are converted from an utterly sinful and dissolute life. The world thinks it's strange, says Peter. That you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation.

And they heap abuse upon you. Christians are different. It makes other people feel uncomfortable. We certainly shouldn't try and make them feel uncomfortable.

[ 17 : 23 ] But the very fact that we are different will make them uncomfortable. Make them feel betrayed. Make them bewildered and threatened. And our lives are invited secondly because Christian lives show up.

The lives of unbelievers. Those who live consistently to Christian standards, inevitably show the difference between their lifestyle and the lifestyle of their friends and acquaintances who don't.

We read the story of King Ahab. There is still one man, he said, to whom we can inquire of the Lord, but I hate him because he never prophesies any good about me, but always bad.

We have the evil king. He hated Micaiah, the man of God. Why? Because Micaiah told the truth. And showed Ahab. Micaiah, the man of God.

And he felt guilty in his conscience when he was confronted by that man of God. And he didn't want to know what Micaiah had to say about his proposed invasion of Ram of Gilead.

[ 18 : 32 ] Light has come into the world. But men love darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

The Christian life is a challenge. Very often to the unbelievers conscience. A challenge which you can't take. Is your life.

Is your life sufficiently distinct to have an effect like that? And then thirdly, we consider the blessing that persecution brings.

You see the meaning of persecution? The inevitability of it and now the blessing of it. He doesn't merely say you will be persecuted.

He doesn't promise them. Only promise them the hard things that are to come. He says remarkably, Blessed I be when men shall persecute you.

[ 19 : 43 ] The persecution is assumed but also the blessing is assured. And here we come, don't we, to just one other of these paradoxes that we've found so often.

in these verses at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. Persecution a blessing. Suffering a blessing. Because a Jew's suffering was a sign of God's displeasure.

The blessing of God implied riches or health or prosperity. That was the kind of benefit the Jews expected from the reign of the Messiah.

And we too, we probably don't regard persecution or any unpleasantness for the Gospel as a blessing. It may be inevitable, it may be something to put up with, but it's not something we relish and it's not something we look forward to.

We may enjoy it, but we surely don't enjoy it. Why is persecution a blessing?

[ 20 : 50 ] Well first of all we must be very clear that it's not all suffering that carries the blessing. Suffering itself imposed, because of the foolishness of what we do, doesn't carry a blessing.

Persecution that we sought because we have a kind of master complex. Something in it that wants to suffer. That doesn't carry a blessing.

Only persecution that's received for the sake of Christ. Persecution is a blessing first of all because it proves our faith.

It shows when we are persecuted that our Christianity is a real thing. It separates the real Christians from the hypocrites.

Men don't suffer. Men don't endure hardship. Men are prepared even to die for something that they don't really believe. Men.

- [ 21 : 57 ] Persecution is our means of separation between the truth, true faith and hypocrisy. The travel of persecution comes, to Jesus in the parable of the sword.
- Because of the world, the seed on the stony ground quickly falls away. Persecution is our token, an evidence of our faith.
- And secondly, persecution is our blessing because of the succession in which we were. So persecuted, says Jesus, they, the prophets, that were before you.
- You are not the first people to suffer like this, says Jesus. Look! Look at your Bibles. You will see that all the faithful people of God.
- See what a glorious procession you are following in. See those who have gone before you. Prophet Jeremiah, beaten and put into the stocks, threatened with death, imprisoned, thrown into a system.
- [ 23 : 05 ] The prophet Amos, thrown out of Israel, told to go and prophesy San Juan. The prophet Micaiah, we read about in 2 Chronicles.
- Remember what happened to him. You study the Old Testament prophets, you find that so many of them endured persecution.
- And the procession goes on into the New Testament. The apostles, we read the testimony of Paul. And that testimony could be added in other parts of the New Testament. And down through the history of the Christian Church.
- Down even to our own days. The reformers who went to the stake for the sake of the Gospel. The covenanters who died in the Moors for the crown rites of the Redeemer.
- In recent years, men like Jim Elliot and the other martyrs who were killed by the Alca Indians in Ecuador back in the 1950s.
- [ 24 : 06 ] These are extreme examples of persecution. But we work in our glorious succession. Persecution is a blessing thirdly because of the one of whom we suffer.
- What a privilege it is to bear the truth to bear the name of Jesus and to share his suffering. To enter even in small measure into what he has endured who gave everything for us.
- There is no better friend for whom you can suffer. What has he not done for you? How can we withhold from him anything that he asks of us?
- The judge says Peter in that passage we read that you participate in the sufferings of Christ. That's a tremendous expression.
- It's one which is almost mind boggling isn't it? How can you and I participate, share in the sufferings of Christ? And that's what the New Testament describes it.
- [ 25 : 19 ] And we're laughter because we're Christians. Remember the fears of the tormenting soldiers who put a robe round Jesus and hit him and said, that we have prophesied to us, O Christ.
- When we are slandered behind our backs, remember the one who was accused of having a devil. When we're held up as a laughing stuff among our friends, because we go to church, because we believe in Christ, remember him who was held up on the cross of Calvary for us and for our salvation.
- We have been to some inconvenience, some social disadvantage, because of our faith. Remember what he wanted, and the choice that we are privileged to share in his son.
- Pray with the apostle, that we may know Christ, and the power of his resurrection. Oh, we all want that, don't we? Paul went on, remember, to pray not only for the power of Christ's resurrection, but for the fellowship of sharing in his suffering, becoming like him in his day, and so somehow to attain the resurrection of the dead.
- And so, persecution is our blessing, because of the one who will be saved. Finally, persecution is a blessing, because of the reward it receives.

[ 26 : 56 ] Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven.

We may not see our vindication here. We may go down to the grave, as so many of the martyrs have done, with our reputations ruined for the sake of Jesus.

We may never see the realms to which we are exposed to drought, but we shall see it hereafter. And what we shall receive there, will more than compensate for anything that we have to undergo for Christ here upon him.

Our light and momentary troubles, says Paul in 2 Corinthians 4, are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. Now you look at what Paul suffered, and you tell me if you will be prepared to call them light and momentary troubles if they happen to you.

But that's how he assesses them. The light of what awaits us, the eternal glory, far outweighs them all. You and I are not to seek for persecution.

[ 28 : 26 ] If we are faithful to Christ, sooner or later, great or small degree, it will come our way. Don't go out looking for it, but be ready for it when it comes.

Rejoice! And be glad, be exuberantly glad, for all these reasons.

And look forward, look forward to the glory, look forward to the great reward in heaven, Lord, even if he did himself, who for the joy that was set before, endured the cross, despising the shame.

Blessed are those who are persecuted, for righteousness sake. Let us pray. Lord our God, we thank Thee that we know so little that persecution is here.

that all of us are conscious that there are times when it's difficult for us to acknowledge that we are Christians.

[ 29 : 39 ] There are times when we are frightened, what others may say or others may do because we belong to Jesus.

We pray when these situations arise, that we may not be afraid and seek to hide from our responsibilities.

But rather remember the word of Jesus and rejoice in the privileges and the blessings that are ours. through these sufferings that Thou dost entrust to us, our faith may be strengthened, our love for Christ may be deep, and our witness to Him be made more obvious to the world.

and the peace to the world. For our faith we ask Him. Amen.