

Blessed are the Persecuted

Matthew 5: 13 – 16ⁱ

The Persecution.

In Acts, chapter 6, Stephen a deacon in the church at Jerusalem was arrested and taken before the Sanhedrin on charges that he had spoken blasphemous words against Moses and God, in addition to speaking against the Temple and the law.

Acts 7 provides with the single longest discourse in the entire book as Stephen defended himself eloquently, giving an ad hoc recitation of Old Covenant history, making clear that he was not speaking against anything, but rather expounding the true meaning of the very scriptures and traditions that the Sanhedrin claimed to uphold. Along the way, he spoke of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, the Law, and the origin of the temple, pointing out near the end that

⁴⁸ ...the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, ⁴⁹ “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? ⁵⁰ Did not my hand make all these things?” Acts 7:48–50 ESV

Up to that point he might have been OK, or at least sentencing could have been delayed to a later time, but Stephen’s conclusion went like this.

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.” Acts 7:51–53 ESV

Acts 7 continues:

⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. Acts 7:54 ESV

But Stephen wasn’t reading the room at that point. Rather,

⁵⁵ ...he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” Acts 7:55–56 ESV

At that,

⁵⁷ ...they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. Acts 7:57–58 ESV

It’s a curious footnote, until a few verses later at the beginning of Acts chapter 8 when we read,

¹ And Saul approved of his execution...

In fact,

...there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Acts 8:1-3 ESV

The Blessing.

But here's the rest of the story. Acts 8, verse 4:

⁴ Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Acts 8:4 ESV

And it's worth mentioning that "those who were scattered", as we read a moment ago, did not include the apostles. It was the church, ordinary people, who were scattered across the empire like seed from a sack, and then went about proclaiming the word. In other words, the persecution did not scare them into silence like it was supposed to. It became the impetus that spread the church from Jerusalem all the way to the uttermost parts of the earth.

It's also worth noting that along the way, Saul, who would later describe himself as

¹³ ...a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent... 1 Timothy 1:13 ESV

was turned, ultimately, to the faith that he sought to destroy, and by the grace of God the persecutor became the persecuted. He described this in 2nd Corinthians, chapter 11, writing of many imprisonments, with "countless beatings" which often left him near death.

²⁴ Five times...

he went on to say,

...I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned... 2 Corinthians 11:24-25 ESV

And all this for the sake of the gospel, and for the Lord whom He once denied, and for the church that he once tried to eradicate. But here's the thing. Later, writing to Timothy, his protégé and son in the faith, he said that he had indeed endured all these persecutions,

¹¹ ...yet from them all the Lord rescued me... 2 Timothy 3:11

Then, he followed up with this encouraging sentence:

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

And what are we to do with this? How are we to understand it? Most of us have heard someone, at one time or another, thank the Lord that we live in a time and place where we can gather to worship without so much as the fear of persecution, never mind the real thing. But Paul said,

¹² ...all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted... 2 Timothy 3:12 ESV

And he wrote to the church at Philippi:

²⁹ For it has been granted to you...

(in other words, it is the gift of God)

...that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake,
Philippians 1:29 ESV

Well, first of all, we need to understand that persecution is not something to be avoided or faced with dread. When we endure persecution, and we will, it's OK, because Jesus said in Matthew, chapter 5,

¹⁰ "**Blessed** are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:10 ESV

And if we are to believe Paul this blessing is not just for the super-Christians, those who attain to such a level that they are perhaps even martyred for their faith, but for all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus, but there's the problem. When we compare what we experience to what Paul endured, it doesn't seem like persecution at all. Even when we read of what our brothers and sisters are experiencing throughout the world, we may ask ourselves, if this is one of the marks of a Christian (and it is), then how is it that we have it so easy?

But before we decide that this sort of thing just doesn't happen in our part of the world, even to those who desire to live a godly life, we need to understand that there's no absolute definition of what constitutes persecution. There's a spectrum. Not everyone will endure the things that Paul endured. Some will, and have gone through far worse, down to this very day. In those parts of the world where Christianity is thriving, persecution is more the rule than the exception.

But even in our text, Jesus didn't say "Blessed are you when others beat you, and imprison you, and stone you..." He didn't even say, "Blessed are you when they take away your job, and your property, and separate you from your family." He simply said:

¹¹ "**Blessed** are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." Matthew 5:11 ESV

So acknowledging that often persecution comes in subtler forms, the kinds that are endured by Christians everywhere: the student or employee who is mocked and laughed at for giving thanks over his lunch; the Christian who is reviled for taking an unpopular stand on social media; the family who is cursed at and despised for taking part in a pro-life vigil. James Montgomery Boice wrote:

It may take more grace and it may be a greater victory for a man to spend forty years of his life at the same desk in the same office watching other men being promoted over him because he will not do some of the things that are demanded of officers in his company

than it would take for a John Hus to be burned at the stake for his testimony. And it may be more of a victory for a housewife to stay at home, raising her family in the things of the Lord while her...neighbors laugh at her for being hum-drum...than it would be for Joan of Arc to die at Rouen. We may all take comfort in this, and turn to Christ for the victory.ⁱⁱ

And even Jesus did not face overt, physical persecution until the end. Instead He was called names, accused of being the devil, and reviled for spending His time with sinners. Still, he said,

¹⁸ "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. John 15:18–19 ESV

So it seems that persecution of some sort is inevitable for the people of God, and this, I believe is the blessing. In facing these things, whatever form they may take, we are identifying and being identified with Christ, who

² ...for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:2 ESV

The Response.

And what is our response to this? Matthew 5, verse 12:

¹² Rejoice and be glad...

Jesus said,

...for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Matthew 5:12 ESV

And this would be echoed by the apostles, all of whom experienced it themselves. We saw it in Romans 5, where Paul wrote:

³ ...we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, Romans 5:3 ESV

And in 2nd Corinthians 12, verse 10:

¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12:10 ESV

James, the brother of Jesus, wrote:

² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. James 1:2–3 ESV

And Peter:

⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that

perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ^{1 Peter 1:6–7 ESV}

And:

¹³ ...rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ^{1 Peter 4:13–14 ESV}

See, this is kind of a theme in Scripture. If you would follow the Crucified Savior, you have to take up your own cross and enter into His suffering, and this is how we become the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Of course, I meant to go farther today, but let me end with something I came across just yesterday, just to give us a sense of how things stand in other parts of this world. According to a website I was looking at, a mission agency working in a less hospitable part of the world, had a series of questions that some of its church planters would ask new believers who were considering baptism. The questions were not requirements for baptism, but were meant to serve as a reminder of what new followers of Jesus might experience if they decided to make this public profession of faith, and whether or not we ever experience such things, the questions are worth considering. They asked:

1. Are you willing to leave home and lose the blessing of your father?
2. Are you willing to lose your job?
3. Are you willing to go to the village and to those who persecute you, forgive them, and share the love of Christ with them?
4. Are you willing to be beaten rather than deny your faith?
5. Are you willing to go to prison?
6. Are you willing to die for Jesus?ⁱⁱⁱ

These were the questions that were asked of new believers, not mature saints. These were the questions that were asked of people for whom the conditions described were clear and present dangers. For us, they are not (not yet), but the question I think we need to ask ourselves is, if any of these things were required of us, would we take them as blessings from God's hand? Would we rejoice and be glad? We we be able to look beyond the persecution, however great or trivial it might seem, fix our eyes on Jesus, and run with patience the race that has been set before us, enduring trials as good soldiers of Jesus Christ?

He endured much more for us. May we then be willing to take up our cross and follow, and to rejoice and be glad in all that may come, that even in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, we may shine as lights in the world.

i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

ii James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1972), 62.

iii "Seven Questions for New Converts in an Asian Country." n.d. Preaching Today. Accessed May 5, 2024. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2012/february/2021312.html>.