

**BLESSED ARE THE PERSECUTED**

Matthew 5:10-12

**Intro:** Today we come to the last of the Beatitudes. In fact, there are two Beatitudes which are mentioned in our text. I am taking them up together because they both have to do with *persecution*. It seems strange to all of us, I am sure, to combine the word “blessed” with the word “persecute” because the Bible shows, and the history of God’s dealings with His people from the very beginning down to the present hour, shows that times of persecution are usually times of suffering and unhappiness. But from these words of our Lord Jesus Himself we can actually say that those who are persecuted under the conditions described in these three verses are *twice-blessed!* This is what our text tells us. (Read verses 10 and 11.) If I can remind you again of the meaning of the word “blessed,” it means to be *happy*, or *supremely blessed*, or even *well off*. The Lord does not say that we should seek persecution, but indicates that it is not to be feared, but even to be anticipated as one of the many instruments, or experiences, which the Lord uses to bring us blessing. The order of the Beatitudes indicates that if we are manifesting the character of people who know the Lord, that persecution will come our way.

But what does it mean *to be persecuted?*

It does not always mean *to kill*, although it has meant that countless numbers of times in the past. John MacArthur used the word *harass*. So the word has a wide range of meanings. When anyone troubles you, or mistreats you, or tries to make life uncomfortable to you, these all fall into the category of persecution. Persecution, to use a word we are all familiar with today, is a form of *abuse*. Those of us who know the Lord in present-day America have not had to suffer like Christians have in other parts of the world although even here it can become very severe at times.

Sometimes Christians are persecuted with words, but at other times it can become more violent

There is another idea in the NT word for persecute which we need to understand, and that is it carries with it the idea of pursuing the one who is being persecuted. We have a good example of that when we see how reluctant Pharaoh was to let the children of Israel go out of Egypt. And then, when he finally let them go, and thought that they were trapped at the Red Sea, he went after them with his army for the purpose of bringing them back to Egypt to make them serve as slaves again. That was perse-

cution.

The life of John the Baptist ended in his early thirties as a result of persecution. And tradition holds that all of the apostles were martyred – and it is very likely the truth.

The supreme example of persecution in the Bible was seen in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. His enemies pursued Him until they succeeded in having Him crucified.

We see it also in the life of the Apostle Paul. When Paul was in Thessalonica, the Jews persecuted him so severely that his fellow believers sent him away to Berea, fearing for his life. But then, when the Jews of Thessalonica heard that he was in Berea, they went to Berea. And this is what we read in Acts 17:13,

But when the Jews of Thessalonica had knowledge that the word of God was preached of Paul at Berea, they came thither also, and stirred up the people.

And so Paul had to leave Berea. But you see that the idea of pursuit was very obvious in what the Jews were doing.

Paul expressed it this way in his second letter to the church at Corinth:

8 We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair;

9 Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed;

10 Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body (2 Cor. 4:8-10).

Persecution was such a common experience among the believers in both the OT and the NT, but especially in the NT, that most of the time suffering is mentioned in the Bible, it has to do with persecution.

But it still seems strange, doesn't it, for our Lord to put the words "blessed" and "persecuted" together. That is, it seems strange until we really examine all that He had to say about persecution in these three verses. But the fact that these verses come last in the Beatitudes, give them a special place of emphasis, and the fact that we have the word "blessed" used two times when our Lord was speaking of this subject, also gives special emphasis to what He was saying.

So the first thing that we ought to notice about these verses is:

## I. THE CERTAINTY OF PERSECUTION (Matt. 5:10-11).

Notice especially in verse 11 that the Lord did not say, “*If* men shall revile you,” etc., but “when they shall revile you ...” And this will especially be true when we as the Lord’s people cultivate the spiritual characteristics that the Lord had just describe in the preceding Beatitudes.

And it seems to be especially strange to me when the Lord went from speaking about His people as “peacemakers” to saying what He did in these three verses we are considering today about being persecuted. You would think that the world would treasure the efforts of those who were true peacemakers, but that is just not the case. In fact, it would seem that the more godly a person seeks to be (and our Lord had been speaking in these Beatitudes about godliness), the more his actions are misrepresented, and the stronger the persecution.

The Apostle Paul told Timothy in 2 Tim. 3:12, “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.” As I have tried to explain, persecution for the people of God varies from time to time from minor difficulties to extreme persecution which can result in death. But for all of us who know the Lord, we must expect persecution. Even when people may not be bothering us, yet the Devil is relentless in his opposition of us, and he has many ways of making life miserable for us so as to discourage us.

We need always to remember those words of our Lord which He spoke to His disciples as they walked from the Upper Room to the Garden of Gethsemane. I am referring to the words found in John 15:18-19:

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

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

Hatred sometimes, as here, can mean simple rejection. Or it can be stronger opposition. But it is clear that the Lord did not build up the expectation of His disciples that life would be easy for them, or for any believer. We are engaged in a spiritual warfare, and we need to expect to be involved in battles.

But let us move on.

The second thing that I want you to notice about what our Lord said in these verses is that:

## **II. THERE ARE THREE CAUSES FOR PERSECUTION WHICH APPLY TO WHAT HE SAID (Matt. 5:10-11).**

You know, sometimes we can bring trouble on ourselves by trying to do the right thing in the wrong way.

Take, e.g., the situation where we have a friend, or even some member of or family, who is not a Christian, and every time we are with that person we try to witness to them and to get them to trust the Lord. It is not to be unexpected if we find that they don't like to be around us. We need to speak to others about the Lord, but there comes a time when we have said all that we can say. That is when we need to spend more time praying, and talk about other things when we are with them. We need to show that we believe in the sovereignty of God, and that the Lord will use what we have said, and even use others if it is in His plan to save those we are burdened for.

Or let me give you another example. A few years ago I had a young man from another fellowship in my Tuesday Bible Class who was an activist. And he did everything he could to try to get me to go down to protest at the abortion clinic on Portland's west side. I don't know how many times he had been arrested, but he looked upon this as persecution. Actually what he did was illegal, and he brought the trouble upon himself. I am against abortions, but as long as it is illegal, it is wrong to block the entrance or to disrupt what they do in those places.

So we need to be very careful not to bring reproach upon ourselves as Christians, or what is worse, to bring reproach upon the name of our Lord. I am sure that many things were going on in the Roman government which were abominable in the Lord's sight, yet neither He nor His apostles after Him ever took a stand against the government, nor did they ever form a political party to oppose the government. They preached the Gospel, and spent much time in prayer. It is easy for us to seek good objectives in the wrong way, in our way, instead of God's way.

What did the Lord say were three legitimate reasons for expecting persecution from the world?

The first was:

### **A. "For righteousness' sake."**

Do you remember what the Lord said in the fourth Beatitude? Look at it

in verse 6. (Read.)

I pointed out several ideas that the Lord could, and probably did, have in mind when He pronounced a blessing on those who “do hunger and thirst after righteousness.” I will just refer to one here. *It meant having an intense desire to live a life that is pleasing to the Lord. It meant not just knowledge of what was pleasing to the Lord, but it meant the transformation of the life.*

To be “persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” expresses the world’s attitude toward godly living. The world doesn’t care about what is pleasing to God, and even being around people whose main concern is to please God, makes the people of the world very uncomfortable. And, read your Bible, and you will see that this is one of the main reasons for the world’s persecution of the Lord’s people. The people of the world resent anyone who doesn’t live like they do. This is what Rom. 12:2 teaches us.

So when we suffer persecution, or lose friends because we want to please God, this is a legitimate reason for experiencing the persecution that comes to us from the world.

Look with me at a second reason:

**B. When the world’s accusations against us are false.**

Notice the word “falsely” in verse 11.

The Apostle Peter wrote a good word for us along this line. You will find the first part in 1 Pet. 2:11-12:

11 Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul;

12 Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.

And then five verses later in the same chapter Peter said this to those who were servants:

18 Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward.

19 For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully.

20 For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it,

ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God (1 Pet. 2:18-20).

False accusations may come. They certainly did against the Lord. And the same was true of the Apostle Paul. But by God's grace let us make sure that the accusations are false. You can't clear all of them up, and so we need to do what Paul told the Roman believers to do. Listen to his words:

17 Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men.

18 If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.

19 Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

20 Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.

21 Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:17-21).

So when false charges are laid against us, let us return good for evil, and trust the Lord to take care of the circumstances.

But perhaps the hardest kind of persecution that comes our way is:

### **C. Persecution “for my sake,” said the Lord (Matt. 5:11).**

The world has no place for the Lord Jesus Christ, either in their thoughts, and certainly not in their lives. We hear His holy Name used in blasphemy constantly. That is always hard to take. And when we tell people that there is only one way to heaven, and that is through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross, the world rebels, and we often, not always, but often, find ourselves being charged with bigotry.

Our main concern is to be the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. We stand for His Deity, His infinite perfection, His death and resurrection, and His coming again. We believe that the Word, both the Old and New Testaments, have Him as their theme – every book in the Bible! Much more could be said here, but let me move on.

The third point in our text that I want to make is this:

### **III. WHAT ARE WE TO DO WHEN PERSECUTIONS COME?**

Well, if we are twice-blessed, we should not be surprised that the Lord said, “Rejoice.” But this is not all that He said. He said, “Rejoice, and be

exceeding glad.” This puts us in the same group with the prophets of the OT. What a company that is!

This strikes us as being rather strange, doesn't it? Should we rejoice when we are being persecuted? The answer is “yes.” And the reason is, not because we enjoy being in trouble, but because the Lord is accomplishing a work in our hearts through our troubles which cannot be accomplished in any other way. The Lord can keep all trouble from us, but the very fact that we have trials is one way the Lord has of continuing to make us more like Himself.

Persecutions and trials show us how weak we are, but the Apostle Paul told us that when we are weak, then we are strong. Troubles always show up our weaknesses, and our constant need of our Lord – our need to trust Him more than we do.

The Apostle Paul was given a thorn in the flesh. He tells us about this, and his reaction to it in 2 Cor. 12:7-10. Listen to his words:

7 And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

8 For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.

9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

There is much more that could be said along this line, but I trust that the Lord will impress all of us with the importance of what we have in these three verses.

Now I have always been able to conclude by speaking of the promises, and today is no exception. In fact, we don't have just one promise, but two. Notice what they are.

#### **IV. TWO PROMISES (Matt. 5:10, 12).**

##### **A. “For their's is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:10).**

We had this in the first Beatitude, and here we come to the same promise in the last Beatitudes. How very important it must be!

This is both a word of assurance as well as a word of testimony! To experience the blessing of the Lord in times of persecution is evidence that we really know the Lord. He does not leave us as victims of anyone, but actually makes us more than conquerors as He works all things together for His own glory and for our eternal good. But also when the world looks upon Christians under fire, and sees their faith in the Lord, and the peace that goes with their faith, this is often the testimony that the Spirit of God uses to draw others to the Lord Jesus Christ. To rejoice in tribulations and persecutions is not human! It is evidence of the sovereign grace of God! And such a testimony often wins a greater hearing for the Gospel than anything else possibly could!

But look at the second promise:

**B. “For great is your reward in heaven” (Matt. 5:12).**

The emphasis in the first promise is upon the present. The emphasis upon the second promise is upon the future, a certain future for every child of God. The Lord here, as in other places and on other occasions, was teaching His disciples (and also us), that we should seek for heavenly rewards. And that is one reason behind all godly living. We ought to seek crowns if for no other reason than that we would have something to lay at our Lord’s feet in the glory. We all should seek to have our Lord say when we stand before Him, “Well done, good and faithful servant ... enter thou into the joy of thy Lord” (Matt. 25:21).

**Concl:** What is your particular trial or persecution today? And what is mine? Are we rejoicing in them, not because we enjoy being troubled, but because of what the Lord is doing in us through them, and because of the unique opportunity they give to us to make the Lord known to others.

It was 274 years ago, in 1724, that Isaac Watts penned the words of that great hymn which we often sing, “Am I a Soldier of the Cross?” It says what I believe the Lord was saying to us in these Beatitudes we have been considering today, and I want to read the hymn to you. It is #481 in our hymnal if you want to follow the words.

Am I a soldier of the cross, A follower of the Lamb,  
And shall I fear to own His cause, Or blush to speak His Name?



Must I be carried to the skies, On flow'ry beds of ease,  
While others fought to win the prize, And sailed through bloody seas?

Are there no foes for me to face? Must I not stem the flood?  
Is this vile world a friend to grace, To help me on to God?

Sure I must fight if I would reign; Increase my courage, Lord;  
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain, Supported by Thy Word.

Thy saints, in all this glorious war, Shall conquer, though they die;  
They view the triumph from afar, And seize it with their eye.

When that illustrious day shall rise, And all thine armies shine  
In robes of vict'ry through the skies, The glory shall be thine.

May the Lord grant us the grace day by day to live for His glory, and to stand faithful for the Lord regardless of the opposition that we face, whether it be great or small. Every persecution gives us the opportunity to glorify God, as well as to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Savior.