

## The Beatitudes

### 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. 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 into the next lock. The locks are interlocking, and ships must pass through each of them in sequence to go from Lake Michigan to the mighty Mississippi and down to the Gulf of Mexico.

The beatitudes are like that. They are interlocking. We begin our faith journey with a sense of spiritual poverty. However, when we complete the process, we are so spiritually connected with Christ that we face persecution just as He did. We come to God searching for authentic and genuine faith, but in the end, we wind up being persecuted for our faith. Of course, the goal of discipleship is not persecution, but the result often is!

Let's read one more time these beatitudes of Matthew 5 before we study this final lesson on the persecuted. "And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying: *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, For they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."* (Matthew 5:1-12 NKJV)

Since the very beginning, Christians have been persecuted.

On January 13, 2021, Open Doors, an international group advocating on behalf of persecuted Christians, released their annual World Watch List. It assesses 50 countries where Christians face the most severe types of persecution. The newly published data reveals that, during the reporting period between October 2019 and September 2020, more than 340 million Christians were living in countries where they will suffer high levels of persecution because of their faith. That's one in 8

worldwide. Open Doors' research identified that every day, 13 Christians are killed for their faith, 12 churches or Christian buildings are attacked, 12 Christians are unjustly arrested, detained, or imprisoned, and 5 Christians are abducted for faith-related reasons. In the 21st century, it is still not possible to practice Christianity safely in many parts of the world.

In his book, *God Seekers*, Richard Schmidt noted that 2/3<sup>rd</sup>s of all Christian martyrs died in the twentieth century. When we hear statistics like these, most of us would like to think our faith in Christ would involve a break between the first seven beatitudes and the dreaded number eight! It's hard to believe that the blessing of God upon us would produce hatred and animosity towards us. We would probably just like to forget about the eighth beatitude, but the connection of this eighth blessing to the preceding ones is essential and central to Jesus' teaching.

Persecution changes everything for the follower of Christ!

## I. The Persecuted

Persecution is not the goal of the Christian life, but a genuine faith in Christ will cause you to face persecution without exception. The Apostle Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:12, "Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." But why in the world would people want to persecute nice people like us?" Well, that's precisely the point. When you become a devoted follower and develop an active faith in Christ, you will, without a doubt, become Satan's target.

In John Chapter 15, Jesus says, "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before *it hated you*. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant 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." (John 15:18-20 NKJV)

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 the early Christians faced. But in many parts of the world today, believers are suffering just as much. Millions of house-church members are considered outlaws and criminals in China because their churches are not registered with the atheistic government.

In her book "The Lion's Den," Nina Shea writes, "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).

In the Muslim country of Sudan, Christians are given these options; they can convert to Islam, flee, be killed, raped, or be taken as slaves. So, the persecution of Christians is not just ancient history. It is alive and well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The life of Christians in China, Afghanistan, Sudan, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Egypt, Nigeria, Cuba, and many other countries is extremely hard and dangerous. In some countries, like Saudi Arabia, citizens of the United States living there are not allowed to worship Jesus Christ openly. It's against the law.

The forms of persecution may vary with circumstances. Fortunately, up to this point, American culture has not yet resorted to fire and dungeons, confiscation, exile, and death. But the sinister way the political and media sources speak against Christianity may be just as brutal as it was 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 by no means lessens its guilt."

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

1. First, persecution can come from your own family. It can happen simply because you accept God's plan of salvation for your life.
2. Secondly, your friends may persecute you. Jesus' hometown rejected Him, and His friends at one point in his ministry said he was crazy. Mark 3:21. Christians don't usually go out looking to be persecuted! They go out to serve and share the joy of Christ and want others to experience the difference they have. But that kind of devotion makes others uncomfortable. The light within a genuine believer exposes the darkness within others. John writes, " **And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.**" (John 3:19 NKJV)
3. The third source of persecution comes from other religious people. You would think that people who call themselves Christians would 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. These pseudo-Christians feel justified to harass and persecute others because what they heard offends them, and they want to justify themselves. Great Christian leaders have received far greater criticism from people claiming to be Christians than from sinners.

4. Another source of opposition comes from governments. It's no secret many nations of the world stand in opposition to the message of Christ. Our own government is headed down this road.
5. 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 cause you to experience persecution, rejection, lies, and slander.

But to those who endure this persecution, Jesus says, "Rejoice! For yours is the Kingdom of Heaven."

## II. The Kingdom of Heaven

There must be some reason to rejoice and be glad in the suffering of persecution. If the same reward in heaven could be obtained without suffering, wouldn't that make suffering useless?

What gave the British believers, Rowland Taylor, Bishop Ridley, and John Bradford, the impulse to kiss the stakes at which they were burned? After ninety lashes, what moved Obadiah Holmes to say to the magistrates, "You have struck me with roses"? Why did Thomas Hardcastle say that persecution is "a precious season of grace"? The answer is they knew that the more your faith is tested through suffering, the greater your reward will be.

Jesus says in Matthew 19:29, "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life." (Matthew 19:29 NKJV)

2 Corinthians 4:17 says, "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen *are* temporary, but the things which are not seen *are* eternal." (2 Corinthians 4:17-18 NKJV)

The Apostle Paul knew a lot about suffering. He saw it from both sides. He says that affliction "prepares" or "brings out in us" an eternal weight of glory. Jesus says, "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven!"

The New Testament truth is, God has a great blessing in store for the persecuted.

## III. The Blessing of the Persecuted

In Romans 8:16, Paul writes, "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him*, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy *to be compared* with the glory which shall be revealed in us." (Romans 8:16-18 NKJV)

Hebrews Chapter 12 verse 1-4 says, "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance 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 has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin." ([Hebrews 12:1-4 NKJV](#))

Jesus wants us to desire the reward of heaven more than we desire the rewards of the world. Jesus wants us to seek out the treasures in heaven, not the treasures on earth. He wants your heart to be so set on heaven that the thought of leaving this earth is a cause for rejoicing! But how can you rejoice and be glad when the things of this life are taken from you if you don't love heaven more than you love this world?

Prophets of old were persecuted and killed for the cause of God and righteousness. According to Hebrews 11, early Christians suffered mocking and scourging, chains, and imprisonment. They were stoned, sawn in two, killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated—of whom the world was not worthy!

Have you ever read their stories or imagined their pain and suffering? Listen to Paul's words in Hebrews 11:26, "By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward." ([Hebrews 11:24-26 NKJV](#))

Have you ever read the testimonies of those who gave their lives for Christ in Foxe's Book of Martyrs? John Rogers was burned alive at the stake in England in 1555 because of his faith in Christ. His children accompanied him to the place of execution and called out encouragement to him through their tears, telling him to be strong and not turn back and dishonor Christ (Ryle, p. 64).

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer left his prison room on the way to the gallows in 1945, he told the camp doctor, Payne Best, "You may think this is the end, but for me, it's the beginning of life" (Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, p. 830).

Ten years later, the camp doctor wrote, "At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God. (Bethge, pp. 830-31)

Vanya Moiseyev was a 20-year-old soldier in the Soviet army who was tortured 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." Tell them: 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.)

Examine the prophets! Examine the martyrs! Do whatever you must do to focus your heart on heaven! Then, you, too, will be able to obey the command of the Lord, "Rejoice and be glad in persecution, for great is your reward in heaven." Let the battle cry of evangelism 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**

Jesus said, "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, the persecuted have two reasons to rejoice and be glad. First, they know that God rewards those who suffer for their faith and that God will reward them greatly. Secondly, they stand in good company, "In the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

In *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, John Stott writes, "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."

Jean Vanier writes, "There are two dangers for the friends of Jesus. The first is the temptation to compromise with a culture that marginalizes and crushes some people to avoid conflict and rejection. The second danger is the temptation to like to disturb this status quo. When we are rebels at heart and want to shock people, we can create a fight in order to be in the limelight. We can do some of these things unconsciously, experience rejection, and then think that we are being persecuted like Jesus was. (*Jean Vanier, Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John.*)

Jesus warns us to stand faithful and not allow ourselves to be blown about by the world's ideologies. Doing His will governs our dealings with the world. If the world chooses to penalize us for this, that is a price we must be prepared to pay.

Clarence Jordan wrote, "One wonders why American Christians seem to get off so easily today. 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?"

Sometimes I ask myself, "What things am I doing for Christ that would merit persecution?" Jesus says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven."