

## **The Teachings of Jesus**

### **Blessed Are the Persecuted**

#### **Matthew 5:10-12**

### **Introduction**

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 vessel in to the next lock. The locks are an interlocking system. Ships must pass through all the locks 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. The believer begins a journey of faith that is marked by spiritual poverty. But, when he emerges from the process, he is so spiritually in tune with Christ that he becomes a candidate for persecution. A person comes to God hunting for authentic, genuine faith and winds up being the one hunted for his faith in the end.

What accounts for this transformation? You can only explain that the goal of discipleship is not persecution, but the result certainly is! Let's read these beatitudes of Matthew 5 one more time before we study this final lesson on the persecuted.

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 5:2-12 NKJV)

Persecution is a part of Christianity. Christians have always been persecuted. John J. Allen, author of the book "The Global War on Christians, says, "Though the numbers rarely show up on popular radar in the West, the International Society for Human Rights reported that Christians are the targets of 80 percent of all acts of religious discrimination in the world today. "Statistically speaking, that makes Christians by far the most persecuted religious body on the planet."

According to the Pew Forum, "Christians faced some form of discrimination, either de jure or de facto, in a staggering total of 139 nations, which is almost three-quarters of all the countries on earth." And the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary says an average of 100,000 Christians have been killed in what the center calls a 'situation of witness' each year for the past decade. That works out to 11 Christians killed somewhere in the world every hour, seven days a week, 365 days a year, for reasons related to their faith.

The deeper your faith and the greater your love for Christ, the more hostile this world becomes towards you. Too often, our concept of faith in Christ takes a break between the first seven beatitudes and this dreaded number eight! Who would guess that the blessing of God upon us will produce hatred and animosity towards us?

But that connection is central to Jesus' teaching. You might think that developing followers who are poor, and mourn; who are meek, hungry, merciful, pure in heart, and peacemakers would result in a timid, weak-kneed group of followers that no one in their right mind would take them seriously or throw stones at them.

But handling the persecution changes everything for the followers of Christ!

## **I. The Persecuted**

If you haven't faced persecution for being a follower of Christ, you should do one of two things: Thank God; or take a closer look at these beatitudes and maybe inventory your life and progress in faith! Persecution is not the goal, but without exception, genuine faith in Christ will face persecution. People face persecution because they are followers of Christ and have a profound commitment to Him. The Apostle Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:12, "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution."

[\(2 Timothy 3:12 NKJV\)](#)

Who would want to persecute you? Well, that's the point. When you decide to pursue an active faith in Christ, you will become one of Satan's targets. Jesus said in John 15, "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. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me." [\(John 15:18-21 NKJV\)](#)

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.

These were the conditions for early Christians. But believers are suffering just as much in many parts of the world today. In her book "The Lion's Den, " Nina Shea writes 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 Sudan, Christians are given few options: Convert to Islam, leave, or be killed, raped, or enslaved. 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 the Sudan, China, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Pakistan, Egypt, Nigeria, and Cuba, and Laos is a life of great suffering.

The forms of persecution vary with circumstances. America has yet to resort to fire and dungeons, confiscation, exile, and death, as many other nations, but the sinister way the political and media arenas speak against Christianity may well be just as sinful as it was to murder them 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 of manifestation by no means lessens its guilt."

Why Are Christians Persecuted? When you examine the life of Christ, you see at least five sources. First, persecution can come from your own family. That can happen simply because you accept God's plan of salvation for your life. If you were raised in a Christian home, that may have little meaning, but for some of you, you know exactly what I mean. The good news is Jesus approves of your new life and faith even if your family does not.

Secondly, your friends may persecute you. The hometown of Jesus rejected Him, and His friends said he was crazy. If your friends are believers, they may not persecute you, but some of you have paid a price for living a Christian life. The fear of losing friends and alienating family keeps some Christians from witnessing their faith! Christians don't go looking to be persecuted! We go out to serve and share the joy of Christ and want others to experience the difference Christ makes in your life. But that kind of difference makes others uncomfortable. The light within us 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)

A third source of persecution comes from other religious people. You would think that people who call themselves Godly people would actually behave like Godly people. And yet, religious persecution is one of the most wicked crimes of all. Many believers are misjudged, maligned, and scoffed at by people who call themselves Christians. They feel justified to harass and ridicule someone because what they heard convicts them, and so they try to justify themselves.

Another source of opposition comes from governments. We've already heard how many believers are suffering worldwide persecution. It's no secret there are many nations that stand in opposition to the message of Christ.

The fifth source of persecution is what Jesus called "the world." The world is where we live and work. It is where we have our connections and associations. Living for Christ in your world can definitely cause you to experience persecution, rejection, lies, and slander.

But for those who endure this persecution, Jesus says, "Rejoice! for great is your reward in the Kingdom of Heaven."

## II. The Kingdom of Heaven

To rejoice and be glad in suffering persecution, doesn't the suffering need to worth it? How will persecution enlarge your reward in heaven? If you could obtain the same reward without suffering, why would anyone choose to face it? Wouldn't that make suffering useless?

What gave Rowland Taylor, Bishop Ridley, and John Bradford the impulse to kiss the stakes before they were burned? What moved Obadiah Holmes, after ninety lashes, 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 must be that the more your faith is tested through suffering, the greater will be your reward.

Jesus says in Matthew 19, "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)

In 2 Corinthians 4, the Apostle Paul wrote, "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)

In verse 12, Jesus says, "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."

God has a great blessing in store for the persecuted.

## III. The Blessing of the Persecuted

In Romans 8, Paul writes, "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 8:18 NKJV)

In Hebrews Chapter 12, he writes, "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 reward of this world. He wants us to build treasure in heaven, not on earth. He wants your heart to be so set on heaven that the thought of leaving this earth is a cause for rejoicing! There is no other way to rejoice and be glad at the loss of your earthly joys.

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? Consider the prophets of old who were persecuted and killed for the cause of God and righteousness. Turn often to Hebrews 11 and read how, by faith the saints have suffered mocking and scourging, and 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.

Read the testimonies of those who gave their all for Christ in Foxe's Book of Martyr. How in 1553 the good king Edward of England died, and the protestant reformation in England was halted. John Hooper was one of the first sent for by Queen Mary to answer for his conduct. He was advised to make his escape, but having determined to meet the storm, he replied, that once before he had taken to his heels, but that now he had resolved to remain, and live or die with his sheep.

Young people, consider the children of John Rogers, who 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 that he might be strong and not turn back and dishonor Christ (Ryle, p. 64).

Hear the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as he left his prison room on the way to the gallows in 1945 and said to 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 said a short prayer and climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have never seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God. (Bethge, pp. 830-31)

Look to the prophets! Look to the martyrs! Do whatever you must to center your heart on heaven! 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."

Let the battle cry of the evangelism movement of Crossroads Chapel be like that 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**

In the face of persecution, Jesus' followers have two reasons to rejoice and be glad. First, we know that God rewards those who suffer for their faith and that their reward will indeed be great in heaven. And second, is that they stand in good company - In the same way, they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

John R. W. Stott writes in *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, "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 in peace with us. Not all attempts at reconciliation succeed."

At the conclusion of the Beatitudes, Jesus's warning is to stand faithful. We have only one Master, and serving him is like serving no other! It is doing His will that governs our dealings with the world, and 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 Christians today get off so easily. 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?"

If you were asked, "What things are you doing for Christ that are worth persecuting?" what would your answer be?