

Sermon Outline - What Does the Bible Say about Persecution?

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A Sermon Outline on the Persecuted Church

Text: Matthew 5:10–12

“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)

1. Understanding Persecution

A. What do we mean by “persecution?”

- a. The Greek word for “persecute,” *dioko* (διώκω) literally means “to pursue, to put to flight, or to chase after.” In a positive sense, it can mean to eagerly pursue or seek after something—for example as in 1 Timothy 6:11 where we are to “pursue righteousness.” However, in a negative sense it means to pursue with an intent to harm. Thus, by implication it means “to harass, to hunt down, to molest, to cause trouble, to oppress”—hence, to persecute.

B. Persecution in the Early Church

- a. Persecution and suffering is one of the themes that runs as an undercurrent throughout the Bible. The word *dioko* (persecution) occurs 45 times in the New Testament in one form or another. Entire books of the New Testament were written to those being persecuted: Hebrews, Philippians, and 1 Peter among them. Many of Paul’s letters were written from prison, where he was confined because of his gospel preaching: Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. John received the Revelation while banished to Patmos, essentially an island prison colony.
- b. It is also important to remember that many of the most prominent Christians in the early church suffered great persecution and martyrdom. Stephen, the deacon, was the first. He was followed by James, the brother of John the Beloved. Church tradition says that all of the twelve Apostles were martyred, except for John, and

their deaths were cruel and horribly painful. Other early church figures who were martyred include Mark, Barnabas, James (the Lord's brother) and Paul.

2. Persecution is Common

In the West, especially in the United States, we have lived for many generations in societies where persecution of Christians is unknown, or at least rare. However, when we carefully read the scriptures, it becomes clear that persecution is not unusual for the church. Indeed, Paul affirms, "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). The writer to the Hebrews stated that believers were commonly afflicted, or were at least companions of those who were (Hebrews 10:33).

A. Prophecy indicates there will be persecution

- a. God even prophesied that His prophets and servants would be persecuted (Luke 11:48–50). Jesus uttered a similar prophecy in Luke 21:12 regarding his followers. Jesus plainly taught that those He sends out with the message of the gospel can expect persecution (Matthew 10:16–26).

B. We should expect persecution

- a. Peter taught believers to expect persecution: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12).

C. Jesus was persecuted

- a. We should not be surprised if we are persecuted, for even Jesus Himself was persecuted by those who opposed Him (John 5:16). Jesus often spoke of His experiencing suffering, abuse, and rejections (e.g., Matthew 16:21; 17:12; Mark 9:12; Luke 17:25). And if our Lord was persecuted, can we expect to escape persecution? Indeed no. Jesus stated clearly, "Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:20).

3. Reasons for Persecution

A. The word

- a. Persecution often results from the proclamation of the word of God. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus comments that "persecution comes because of the word" (Matthew 13:21; cf. John 8:37). We see this in the Old Testament when the

prophets of God suffered because of their declaration of truth against sinful people.

- b. Stephen faced a similar situation in the New Testament. He confronted the Jewish rulers with their rejection of the Messiah. In Acts 7 we see his bold proclamation of truth, revealing the sinful, rebellious hearts of those listening. Stephen's audience did not want to hear the prophetic truth he proclaimed. They even covered their ears to block the sound of his voice (Acts 7:57). The immediate result was the stoning of Stephen himself, the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:57–58). However, a general persecution against the church also arose following Stephen's confrontation with the Jewish rulers and his consequent martyrdom (Acts 8:1; 11:19).

B. The name

- a. Believers may also suffer persecution because of their identification with the person of Christ Himself. For example, in Acts 5:41 the Apostles rejoiced because they were “counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.”
- b. Jesus predicted in the latter times that people would hate His followers simply because they belonged to Him: “Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me” (Matthew 24:9).
- c. When God sent Ananias to minister to the newly converted Paul, he was told that Paul would learn “how much he must suffer for my name” (Acts 9:16).

C. The difference in lifestyle

- a. The Bible teaches that Christians are persecuted because we are not of this world. Our values, behavior, thinking, perspectives, and lifestyle all mark us as different (cf. 1 John 4:4–6). And this difference causes animosity, and even hatred, on the part of the people of this world. Jesus said, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 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; also see 1 Peter 4:3–4).

4. How Do the Persecuted Respond?

Christians all around the world suffer mistreatment because of their faith. This may range from discrimination and prejudicial attitudes to oppression and violence, even death. In the West we may not often suffer as severely as in some other areas (although it does happen), yet persecution still may occur. Whether a Christian faces imprisonment and death, or slander and bigotry, how should they respond?

A. As hopeful witnesses

- a. God uses persecution as a testimony to the power of the gospel message. We must remember that our word “martyr” is actually derived from the Greek word *martus* (μάρτυς) which means “witness.” The early church applied this term to those

who suffered and died for their faith because their deaths were such a powerful testimony for the gospel. In the midst of persecution, the Christian upholds a testimony to the word of God and the gospel. He should be fearless and unmoved (Matthew 10:28; Acts 20:24; Revelation 12:11). He should not be ashamed (1 Peter 4:16). He refuses to deny the truth (Revelation 2:13).

B. Enduring the persecution

- a. Sometimes the Christian manifests trust in God by simply enduring the persecution: “When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it” (1 Corinthians 4:12). The word “endure” here means “to bear with, to hold up under, to tolerate.” The Christian does not retaliate, but neither does he bow. He puts up with the suffering in humility and returns love for hate, yet stays true to his faith and his Lord. As Paul says elsewhere, when persecuted we are “struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Corinthians 4:9). We endure (James 5:10–11).

C. Moving on

- a. However, to stay and suffer persecution is not always the will of God. Sometimes flight is required (see Matthew 10:23). It is not lack of spirituality or cowardice to flee from persecution. It is common sense. When persecution begins, it may be prudent to simply move to another place where the Gospel will be more readily received. This was certainly the case in the ministry of Paul (e.g., Acts 14:5–7).

D. Looking up

- a. A lesson that persecution teaches us is that our life does not consist of the things of this world—not its comforts, luxuries, or acceptance. We are citizens of a different realm. That is why Hebrews says, “You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions” (10:34). That is also why Paul said, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

E. Loving the persecutors

- a. Jesus taught us that when persecuted, we should love our enemies, and pray for those who are persecuting us (Matthew 5:44). Paul echoes the same sentiment when he commands, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (Romans 12:14).

F. Accepting God’s love

- a. It must be understood that persecution is not a sign of divine displeasure. It is not punishment. To the contrary, to suffer for Christ may be viewed as an honor that God bestows on His people (see Acts 5:41). Further, it does not indicate a lack of fellowship with God in anyway. For as Paul asserts, persecution cannot separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:35). Indeed, our status is that we are “persecuted, but not forsaken” (2 Corinthians 4:9).

G. Trusting God

- a. In the midst of persecution, we must keep in mind that God loves us, and He is in control. Writing to a persecuted body of believers, Peter wrote, “So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good” (1 Peter 4:19). Paul learned to have such trust in the sufficiency of grace that he could “delight...in persecutions” (2 Corinthians 12:10). It is not that the suffering is pleasant. Of course it is not. It is simply that God’s grace is completely sufficient, even in hardship, even in persecution.

H. Coming together

- a. Persecution often unites the church. Fellow sufferers come together to console, encourage, and strengthen one another. Those who are not currently suffering still may compassionately and empathetically share in the afflictions of others in the body: “Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering” (Hebrews 13:3). As believers we are commanded to “rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15; see also 1 Corinthians 12:26).

5. Why Does God Allow Persecution?

A. Divine Fellowship

- a. Suffering allows the believer to enter into an intimate fellowship with the Lord, who Himself suffered for us. This is one of those truths that seem odd to our modern way of thinking. Yet for the Christian there is a communion with Christ that occurs no other way. Paul even expressed a desire to know Christ in this way, in His suffering as well as His glory: “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (Philippians 3:10). Note Colossians 1:24 and Romans 8:17 in this regard.

B. A Witness

- a. As previously noted, one of the primary reasons that God allows persecution is that it serves as a witness to the gospel. That believers are willing to suffer, even to die, for their faith is a powerful demonstration of the reality of Christ’s presence in their lives.
- b. Paul often speaks of what he endured for the Lord. “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body” (2 Corinthians 4:8–10). Take note of what he says in verse 10. He bears in his body

the “death of Jesus.” His very suffering is a sign of the life of Christ in him, and is a testimony to the world of the reality of the gospel.

C. Blessing

- a. There is a blessing for those who are persecuted (Matthew 5:10). This may seem incongruous to us. We do not equate suffering and hardship with blessing. But we must remember that God’s kingdom operates on different rules and principles than our natural order of things. (See also 1 Peter 3:14 and 4:14.)
- b. Another example of this is seen in Philippians where Paul indicates that suffering can actually be a gift from God—“For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him” (Philippians 1:29). Notice that to suffer for Christ is a “grace” from the Lord; a privilege He bestows on believers (cf. Acts 5:41). (The word “granted” here means “to give freely, to show favor, to graciously bestow.”)

D. To glorify God

- a. This not an idea that we may want to hear—but the Bible is clear. Persecution and suffering can be an instrument to bring glory to God. Consider the words of 1 Peter 4:12–16, written to persecuted Christians.

E. To glorify saints

- a. Suffering is a prerequisite to glory. That may sound strange to our ears, but it is clearly indicated in the Bible. We see this in the life of Christ (Luke 24:46; Hebrews 2:9; 1 Peter 1:11). Paul expresses a similar sentiment, saying that we are “heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (Romans 8:17). Note that the suffering not only comes before the glory, the suffering results in the glory.

F. For a reward

- a. God prepares a reward for the persecuted (Matthew 5:12). In fact, one of the promised crowns given in heaven is the crown of life, given to those who suffer for Christ (see Revelation 2:10). We must recall that the Bible says that if we endure the afflictions of this life, then we shall reign with Him (2 Timothy 2:12).

6. What Is Our Responsibility?

A. Remember: Hebrews 13:3

- a. The Greek word for “remember” in this verse is very interesting. It doesn’t mean just to recall something. Rather, it means to actively and intentionally remind ourselves of something. It requires a high level of personal involvement and personal attention to be given to a thing.

- b. Thinking about this, how should we “remember” those who are suffering? What are practical ways we can intentionally and actively remember the persecuted? Ask yourself: “How am I intentionally and personally remembering the persecuted?”

B. The body of Christ

- a. One of the common images of the church in the New Testament is that of a human body. The Bible is clear: when one member of the body suffers, all suffer. We are an organic unity. We are one in Christ.
- b. Verses to consider in this regard:
 - i. 1 Corinthians 12:25–27
 - ii. Hebrews 10:34
 - iii. Matthew 25:36

Conclusion: Persecution of Christ’s Body

When Saul of Tarsus was confronted with the living Christ on the road to Damascus, Jesus asked him a very telling question, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul thought he was simply ridding Judaism of an obnoxious, heretical sect. What he did not realize was that he was pursuing the very people of God, the followers of the Messiah. And by persecuting them, he was persecuting the body of the Messiah, and thus persecuting the Messiah Himself. God in His sovereign love, grace and knowledge allows, and even ordains persecution for His children. Yet, this is not a light thing. For the Lord, it is a personal matter. Those who suffer oppression are His sheep, His children, His body. He will never forget their suffering. Neither must we (Hebrews 13:3).

As a conclusion to this message, think about these two questions:

- What will this group do to remember the persecuted church, and to be engaged with them in their suffering?
- What will I personally do to obey Hebrews 13:3 and to show love and compassion for those who are suffering for Christ?

Resources

Additional resources available from Advancing Native Missions:

- *Transformed by Pain* by Brother K
- *Danger and Deliverance* by Brother K
- *Voices in the Wilderness* by Douglas Hsu
- Our e-book titled, *What Does the Bible Say about Persecution?*

To learn more about how you can help Christians around the world spreading the good news of Jesus beyond persecution, visit <https://advancingnativemissions.com/persecuted/>.

Finally, remember **November 3, 2019** is the **International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church**. Set aside time for you, your small group, or your church to pray for and recognize the millions of Christians around the globe who suffer regularly to follow our lord and savior, Jesus.