

Introduction

The pictures and stories coming out of Texas this week have been utterly stunning. Some families that were separated have been united. Other families lost their lives. The amount of property damage is just mind-boggling. Who can help but be moved by the devastation, suffering, and hardship? Not a few have left home to go and help with the recovery effort. Many are giving donations through Christian channels like Southern Baptist Disaster Relief and Samaritan's Purse. It is just a horrific, heart-gripping spectacle. It has been especially so for me because this is the area of the country where I was born, have relatives, and have visited many times through the years.

And when we think of the persecuted church around the world, it should strike us no less powerfully. Open Doors USA is a ministry to persecuted Christians worldwide. Open Doors estimates that around the world on a monthly basis 322 Christians are killed for their faith, 214 churches and Christian properties are destroyed, and 772 forms of violence are committed against Christians. These include beatings, abductions, rapes, arrests, and forced marriages. We have reason to pause and consider how do we respond? How are we to process this reality and what are we to do? And how ought Christ followers living in the United States of America view our own lives in reference to persecution? Well, a good place to start in answering these questions is to consider what Jesus had to say about persecution in the Sermon on the Mount.

[Read Text and Pray]

This is the eighth and final beatitude. It stands out from the others in a couple ways. First, it is the most detailed. It is the one of which Jesus deems it necessary to offer added explanation. And in the explanation he uses the pronouncement of blessed a second time. Each of the beatitudes is provocative some more obviously than others. But the eighth beatitude is perhaps the most stunning. It is the one to which we respond with the greatest degree of perplexity. Wait a minute! Persecuted? How could you

consider persecution a blessing? And how is it that people who manifest the characteristics set forth in these beatitudes—poor in spirit, mourning over sin, meekness, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, mercy, pure in heart, and peacemaking—how is it that people like this would be persecuted? To be sure Jesus did not experience a slip of the tongue. He did not mean to say something else. As with the other beatitudes these, and specifically these persons, are the ones who are blessed. He has given us plenty to examine and understand here. I want us to consider three points in particular that pertain to the persecution about which Jesus speaks—the nature, the inevitability, and the blessing.

I. The Nature of Persecution

A. To persecute is to go after someone with hostile intent. It is to bring harm on them. Persecution oppresses and squeezes the life out of the one it persecutes. It puts heavy pressure on them in opposition to what they profess. This was the intent of the unconverted Saul of Tarsus. He stood there when the angry mob executed Stephen. He obtained authority to arrest Christians and bring them bound to Jerusalem to answer for their infidelity to Judaism. He pursued them in order to do them harm.

B. Persecution manifests itself in a variety of ways. Clearly it can be physical. People who experience physical persecution are tortured, beaten, maimed, imprisoned, starved, raped, even killed. But persecution is sometimes more subtle. Jesus points that out in his explanatory note. He said, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely." To revile means to criticize in an angrily abusive way. It insults and treats with scornful abuse. Persecutors may operate to your face or behind your back. And what is more, they do not even care whether their insults are true or false. In fact they may utter all kinds of evil against you falsely. It is not driven by rationality so truth matters not. All that matters is bringing scorn and insult to bear upon those it seeks to injure. They may believe they are right and their evil accusations are true, but the persecuted know that often they are not. This knowledge adds to the pain.

Christians are experiencing false accusations from our society today. Because we possess and live by biblical convictions, we are considered

“haters.” We are labeled “phobic” and “judgmental.” Now in some cases, it is no doubt true. But by and large, these evil accusations are false. It is not right. But false accusations bantered about loudly take hold in a society’s mind. And the politically correct mantras gain a foothold among a low information public. It becomes a mob with a cause to bring justice down on mean people who are said to be bent on keeping some people from being happy. Jesus said it would be this way. Not only in the beatitude but he also spoke forthrightly in John 16: They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.

C. So persecution is manifested as hostility and it manifests itself in a variety of ways. But Jesus is explicit about the cause of the persecution he has in mind when he says, “blessed are those who are persecuted.” I mean people are persecuted for all kinds of reasons. You may be persecuted for the color of your skin or the accent with which you speak. You may be persecuted deservedly for hostility of your own. People are filled with hate and anger in this world and it is always coming out. Tribal factions foment hatred against one another. Political movements are often ruthless to anyone not onboard with their cause. However, the persecution about which Jesus speaks in this beatitude is persecution that is received because of righteousness. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.” In his explanatory note, he specifies that these are those who are persecuted on his account. They are persecuted because of Jesus.

In other words he is not talking about being persecuted because you are a nuisance or because of your tribal ancestry. He is talking about persecution for saying and doing and standing for what is right and true before God. He is talking about being persecuted for following and being like Jesus.

He is talking for example about what happened to Abel, Adam and Eve’s firstborn. In the course of time both he and his brother Cain brought offerings to the Lord. But while the Lord had regard for Abel’s offering he did not have regard for the offering of Cain. Cain brought an offering without faith and God rejected it. This so inflamed the rage of Cain that he rose up against his brother and killed him. He could not kill God so he killed the one who represented God before him. Abel was persecuted for

righteousness. He did what was right and it excited seething anger within Cain.

It was the same with Jesus himself. All he ever did was obey the Father. He never sinned. He was gentle and kind. He healed and taught. He confronted wickedness. Every accusation against him was false. But a mob joined together on the night of his betrayal to cry out, "Crucify!"

Christ calls all who would come after him to take up their cross and follow. And when we follow, when we own Jesus as our Savior and Lord, when we live a life seeking to obey him in all things, we will not be able to escape the hostility of a world in which Satan is the prince of the power of the air. We will face persecution. And that persecution for the name and for the righteousness of God is the persecution Jesus is talking about here.

II. The Inevitability of Persecution

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil things against you on my account."

Persecution for followers of Christ is inevitable. If you live godly in Christ Jesus; if you take up your cross and follow him; if you boldly own him as your Lord; if you stand for what he stands for; you will be persecuted.

A. Jesus does not say "if" in this beatitude but "when." When you are persecuted. Persecution is one of those difficult realities of being a follower of Christ. It is part taking up the cross. This reality of following Jesus is one we tend to avoid. The mentality of the world in which we live is a sales mentality. And a sales mentality focuses only on the positives. If you know of any negatives about a product you are seeking to sell, those are things you just do not mention. But Jesus was careful to inform his followers and his potential followers that if you follow him, it will mean you will have to suffer. The world will not love you. It will treat you with hostility. It will turn on you. It will treat you the way Cain treated Abel.

Earlier this morning we read from John 15 and 16 where Jesus warned how the world would treat those who follow him. "If you were of the world, the

world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you." . . . "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you." "All these things they will do to you on account of me." "They hated me without a cause." "I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God."

B. The Apostle Paul spoke similarly to the Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians he writes with great urgency thinking of the persecution which was upon them. He remarks how they became imitators of himself and the Lord Jesus because even in receiving the word, they were being persecuted. In that way they became an example to all the believers. He said they were like the Judean churches because they suffered the same things from their countrymen as the others did from the Jews. These enemies of the cross just want to keep people from hearing the gospel so that they might be saved. He points out that the Thessalonians knew they were destined for these kinds of afflictions because he had warned them in advance that it would be so.

Paul was in constant conflict with enemies of the gospel. They sought his life. They stirred up strife. They got him arrested. They stoned him and left him for dead. He told Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:12: "Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Several words just jump out at me here. Indeed. It is an acknowledgment of a truth perhaps doubted by some but which is shown in fact to be true. All. Not some. Not many. Not a few. ALL. Will. Not might or could or should. Will. Not possibility but inevitability. Paul is just underscoring what Jesus already said. Blessed are you WHEN you are persecuted.

C. And how about Peter? In 1 Peter 4:12 he writes, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings."

D. Believer, be warned. To follow Jesus faithfully will cost you. It is not easy. It is a war. Many times it is the world against you for the sake of the

name of Jesus. In many places in the world, they will kill. But even if they do not kill, they will malign. They will scoff. They will insult. They will hate. They will speak evil even lie in order to discredit and impugn. It is inevitable for the citizen of the kingdom.

Do you want to escape persecution from the world? If you would choose escaping persecution, I can tell you how. It is going to cost you, but here it is. Love the world and live like the world. The world loves its own. If you live like the world, the world will love you and they will not persecute you. You approve of me in my sin and I will approve of you in yours. And we will walk arm-in-arm.

John MacArthur asks us to imagine a man who accepts a new job in which he must work with especially profane people. He comes home at the end of his first day. His wife asks him, "how did you manage?" He says, "It was great! They did not even suspect I was a Christian!" As long as people do not suspect you are a follower of Jesus, you can avoid the persecution of the world. But if you live for him, if you manifest Christ to the world, you will share in his sufferings.

It is true that the laws of a nation can mitigate against the cruelest forms of persecution. Thankfully, we live in a country with a strong Christian influence in its formation. Generally, we must not worry that our lives will be taken by those who hate the Lord. But nevertheless, we will not escape some kind of persecution. The more we live like Jesus and the more we stand for what he stands for, the more the world will hate us and the more we will suffer affliction for his name.

E. So here are several words of warning and encouragement.

1. When you experience persecution, it does not necessarily mean you are doing really badly in following Christ. It does not mean that God has lost control. When you experience persecution as you diligently try to share the gospel, as you stand for righteousness, as you refuse to compromise truth and righteousness, remember he said this is the way it would be. Jesus said it in advance so that when the evil day came, you would not lose heart but would keep on. Remember this how the world treated Jesus. And what

they are mistreating is actually Jesus shining through you. And while that is ugly to this world, nothing is more beautiful to God.

2. In fact you could take from what Jesus is saying here in this beatitude, that suffering persecution is a strong assurance that you are in fact saved. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. When you are persecuted for Jesus' sake, the world is saying they see Jesus in you.

3. What if you never experience insults, scorn, or criticism for Christ? Then maybe the world does not see a difference between itself and you. Maybe you need to examine yourself to see whether you really are following Christ.

To the Philippians Paul wrote, (1:29) "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake."

Persecution is a test which will bear out whether we belong to him or not. And you do not have to go out and try to make people persecute you. Don't worry, if you live in obedience to Jesus, they will. They will.

III. The Blessing of Persecution

You might say that this is the beatitude of the double blessing. With respect to this characteristic of kingdom citizens alone do we hear Jesus repeat the word blessed. Perhaps it is because it is so difficult for us to imagine that persecution could really be a blessing. At any rate he twice pronounces those who are persecuted for righteousness as blessed.

A. The blessing is the assurance of salvation, the assurance of belonging to the kingdom of heaven and the immense difference of degree there is between the suffering and the glory to follow. From the moment the first sin was committed to now, this world has lived in defiance and hostility against the God who created it, yet all the while believing itself to be good and deserving of good. It despises the light because the light exposes its darkness and evil heart. The world becomes irrationally angry at what reveals its sin and guilt. It refuses to come to the light and wants nothing less than to snuff it out. Its antagonism against God spills over to those

who are loved by God and called by his name. So when they persecute these citizens of the kingdom, it is a great assurance of blessing to them. They are not like the world and they have a different destiny than the world.

Paul writes the Philippians that when they stand together striving side by side for the faith of the gospel even though they face opponents, it is a clear sign that the opponents face destruction but believers are saved. Brothers and sisters, whatever we may suffer is not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed. Jesus knows it well. He says that kingdom citizens when they are persecuted for his name are to rejoice and be glad, for our reward is great in heaven.

B. I am a lover of a good deal. When I know I have gotten a good deal I rejoice. If I feel I have been taken to the cleaners, I do not like it. And you know there isn't a deal around that compares to the deal given by God to those who are poor in spirit, who mourn over sin, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are meek, who make peace, and who are persecuted for righteousness. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Even in the midst of persecution they can rejoice and be glad. The suffering is not worthy of comparing with the glory that is to be revealed. Now let's be honest. You can't pay much more than to be persecuted, but even then you share a fellowship with Jesus himself. But the return is incredible. Sins forgiven. Fellowship with the God of the universe restored. Tears vanished. Pain erased. Glory immeasurable in its fullness.

The prophets paid the price. Jesus paid the price. All kingdom citizens pay that price, but redemption is more than worth it. It is glorious and it is eternal.

Conclusion

With all the Bible says about persecution, how ought we respond to the fact that persecution of Christ followers abounds in our world?

1. We do not lose heart and we urge them not to lose heart either. From a principle standpoint we recognize that this is the way that Jesus said it would be. That the road to heaven is paved with the blood and trials of

those who suffer for the cause of the gospel. We should rejoice in behalf of those whose salvation is being assured.

2. We should connect with persecuted Christians to be personally involved with them. The Apostle Paul was always undergoing all kinds of persecution himself, but he was also mindful of other believers who were being persecuted. He warned them of the reality of persecution and he encouraged them in the midst of it to keep the faith and endure to the end. And we should do the same. We cannot connect with everyone but we can connect with some. And we should.

3. We should magnify our fellowship with persecuted Christ followers around the world. We can do this through prayer for their steadfastness and their endurance. We should also use our freedom and opportunity to diminish their suffering if possible, to be a voice for them whose voice is not heard and to work against the injustice of persecution. It is kind of an odd thing. We work against something Jesus said will be and must be. Yet we work against it because it is wrong and we long to comfort our brothers and sisters. As long as there is sin there will be persecution. But it provides us a great opportunity ultimately to identify with our Savior who bore our suffering and died in our place.