

## Facing Times Of Stress: Forewarned Of Persecution!

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Given 14-Aug-21; Sermon #1611

There is no doubt and it has always been true that an individual who searches for truth in all areas of life, and follows Jesus Christ's teachings and lives as He did, will be subjected to similar injury and difficulty as He did. Our Christian beliefs cause us to be exposed to ridicule, treated with neglect, and excluded from society to which our accomplishments and behaviors publicly identify us. King David prays in Psalm 35 that justice might be done against his enemies, some who pretend to be his friends.

**Psalm 35:19-20** Let them not rejoice over me who are wrongfully my enemies; nor let them wink with the eye who hate me without cause. For they do not speak peace, but they devise deceitful matters against the quiet ones in the land.

Disciples of Christ have always been falsely accused. What is the cost of discipleship? One major cost is that the one who faithfully follows Christ will be persecuted. Jesus was totally honest about discipleship. True, He taught the many and great advantages of following Him: eternal life, access to the Father through prayer, the gift of the Holy Spirit, a place prepared for us in the Kingdom of God. But at the same time, He never glossed over the fact that love for Him would mean the world's hatred—and that word *hatred* cannot be expressed strongly enough.

We have a prominent example of this in the verses that form the second half of John 15. Jesus had been stressing the blessings that naturally come to one who has left all to follow Him. He had been doing this to comfort the disciples because they were rightly distressed at thoughts of their Lord's pending departure. But then the emphasis changes, and instead of privileges, Christ speaks of persecution.

It is always true that people who live God's way of life will experience some form of persecution. What is persecution? What constitutes it? The essence

of persecution consists in subjecting a person to injury or disadvantage as the reaction to his opinions, his beliefs. It is more than reacting to his opinions by argument. It is inflicting some injury on him, depriving him of some privilege or right, subjecting him to some disadvantage, or placing him in less favorable circumstances as the result of his ideas.

Let us explore this further. This may be an injury done to his feelings or his family, his reputation, his property, his liberty, or his influence. It may be by depriving him of an office which he held or preventing him from obtaining one to which he is eligible. It may be by subjecting him to fine or imprisonment, to banishment, torture, or death. Persecution is wide-reaching as a broad word to define. And still further, if in any way he is subjected to disadvantage because of his religious beliefs and deprived of any protections and rights to which he would otherwise be entitled, this is persecution. Or he may be shunned by those who might otherwise value his friendship. These things may be expected in the best of times and under the most favorable circumstances.

It is well known that a large part of the history of the world in regard to God's church is nothing more than a history of persecution. Therefore, it follows from this that, one, we who are called into God's church by God Himself should be mentally and spiritually prepared to be persecuted. It should be considered as one of the proper qualifications of membership in the church to be willing to bear persecution and to resolve not to shrink from any duty in order to avoid it.

Two, we who are persecuted for our beliefs should consider that this may be one evidence that we have the Spirit of Christ and are His true friends. We should remember that, in this respect, we are treated as our Savior was and are in the sanctified company of the prophets and the apostles and the martyrs, as they also were persecuted.

Three, if we are persecuted, we should carefully ask ourselves before we assume that we are persecuted for righteousness' sake, whether we are persecuted because we live godly in Jesus Christ or for some other reason. A person may embrace some absurd opinion and call it faith and be persecuted for it. Persecution that will provide any evidence that we are the followers of Christ must be only that for which is for righteousness' sake and must be

brought upon us in an honest effort to obey God's commands. Persecution for other reasons may not be for righteous reasons.

And four, those who have never been persecuted in any way, question whether it is not evidence that they have no convictions. If they had been more faithful and more like God the Father and His Son, would (and it is a question), they have always escaped? And may not their freedom from it prove that they have surrendered the principles of their faith and that they have merely preferences where they should have stood firm though the world were arrayed against them.

So, it is easy for a professed Christian to avoid persecution if he yields every point in which God's way of life is opposed to the world. But let not a person who will do this suppose that he has any claim being numbered among the martyrs or entitled to the Christian name. It is that important.

Please turn with me to John 15. The dominant theme in verses 18 through 25 here is the hostility of the world to Christ and His followers, and the word hate or hatred being repeated seven times. Earlier, He had spoken of "His own," now, of "the world." Before it was "friends" and now it is "enemies" here in the end of John 15. Now earlier, He declared His love for His disciples and exhorted them to love. In these verses, He warns of the world's hatred and He is very strong about it.

These verses are of great importance, if for no other reason than that we might learn of the great gap between those who are Christ's own and the world. I have mentioned this before in other sermons. There is a tremendously great difference between us—and there should be. If we look like the world in every way and act like the world in every way, I cannot call it difference. If we understand it, we will not raise so many questions as to whether there is harm in this or that. We will not ask how worldly we can be. Rather, we will seek the will of God in all things and strive for God's glory.

**John 15:18-25** [The caption in my NKJV Bible is The World's Hatred] "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 persecute you. If they have 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. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates Me hates My Father also. If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would have no sin; but now they have seen and also hated both Me and My Father. But this happened that the word might be fulfilled which is written in their law, 'They hated Me without a cause.'"

There is so many principles in there and so many important factors that we want to take a look at in there that have to do with persecution and they are encouraging. As we get through this, it will become more encouraging.

Christ begins by talking about the hatred of the world for His disciples. We are His disciples, it is also talking to us. But the focus of the verses is not only to say that they will be hated, it is also to show why. He gives three reasons.

The disciples of Christ will be hated because they are not of the world and when John uses the term world, as he does five times in just the one verse, he is using it not of the globe or the earth. Rather, he is using it of the *world system*, and it is the world of humans in rebellion against God and consequently it is inclusive of the world's values, its indulgences, its entertainment, its ambitions. And it is said of the world in this sense that it does not know God and that it rejected Jesus.

**I John 3:1** Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him.

This is the world that hates Christ's followers and the reason it hates them is that they are not of it. The world hates them for the difference.

In William Barkley's commentary on John, there are three illustrations of this principle, all from secular sources, that he gives. They are very short but you will find them interesting, I am sure.

The first concerns the man who invented the umbrella. Today, umbrellas may be seen everywhere and are not all that unusual. But when Jonas Hanway first tried to introduce the umbrella in England of all places and walk down the street beneath his umbrella, he was pelted with dirt and stones. He was persecuted for it.

The second example is Aristides of Athens. Aristides lived during Athens golden era and was an outstanding man. He was called Aristides the Just, yet he was persecuted and banished from Athens. But why? When one of the citizens was asked why he had voted for Aristide's banishment, he answered, "Because I am tired of hearing him always called the Just." It shows you a little bit of the mentality of the world.

The third illustration is Socrates. Socrates was known as the human nuisance because he was always calling upon others to examine themselves and think deeply. But for this they hated and killed him.

Barkley concludes from this, "To put it at its widest, the world always suspects nonconformity. The world likes a pattern. It likes to be able to label a person and to classify him and to put him in a pigeonhole. And anyone who does not conform to the pattern will certainly meet trouble."

If this is true of any difference at all, as it seems to be, how much truer is it of the radical difference caused by the transformation of some individuals by the Spirit and power of Jesus Christ? Here is a difference that makes the unusual qualities of Hanway, Aristides, and Socrates pale by comparison.

First, Christians have been with Jesus and have become like Him in part. We are not like the world, at least we had best not be. Now, we have all other experiences, loyalties, and goals. So the world hates us for all these things that are different.

There is a second reason Jesus gives for the world's hatred of His disciples and this is that He has chosen us out of the world. As He says in verse 19, "Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you." What is the meaning of this? It is merely the subject of election, Christ elected His disciples to salvation. He chose us for a specific work in this world. Therefore, although the world rejects Christ's salvation and despises His work, it also hates those who have been chosen by Him for it.

There is probably nothing other than Christ that the world hates more than the elect. Certainly it was this more than anything else that caused the world's virulent hatred of Christ during the days of His ministry. In John 6, after Jesus had begun to talk about election, pointing out that no one is able to come to Him unless drawn by the Father, and that those who do not come to Him do not because they cannot, we read that even many of His disciples abandoned Him.

**John 6:66** From that time, many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more.

Similarly, in John 8 after He had taught the same thing, we read,

**John 8:59** Then they took up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.

Nothing so stirs up the hatred of the worldly mind than the teaching of God. In sovereign grace, He elects some and does not elect others at this time.

The third reason is, because it hates Christ, the world hates Christians because of our identification with Him.

**John 15:19-21** "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. And 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."

Here is the crux of the matter. Why does the world hate Christians? Because it hates our Master. Hatred does not exist because of what we Christians are in ourselves. We are, comparatively, nothing. Hatred does not exist because of what we have done against it. We are harmless and peaceful, in one sense. Hatred exists because the world hates Jesus and because Christians are identified with Him because of God the Father's call.

But in a sense, this only pushes the problem back one step, because having explained the first hatred by the hatred of Jesus, we immediately asked, but why does the world hate Jesus? It is a perfectly valid question.

The first reason is that the world hates Jesus because of His words.

**John 15:22-23** "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates Me hates My Father also."

But why should they hate Jesus for His words? There are people whom we might hate for their words. Some people's words are arrogant and people are opposed to them for their arrogance. We all hate pride and show no pity except in ourselves. But Jesus was not arrogant. Rather, He was entirely humble, the most perfectly humble Man that ever lived.

**Isaiah 53:7** He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.

Some people's words are selfish. Everything revolves around themselves and they are rightly despised for that. But Jesus was not selfish. He gave up His divine privileges in order that He might become like us and die for our salvation.

Some people's words are mean. But can we hate Jesus for that? He was not mean. Instead He was loving and gentle.

**Matthew 11:28-30** "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

In still other cases, the words people speak are hypocritical and they are hated for that. But Jesus was not hypocritical. Instead He is the only man who ever lived whose word could always be trusted. Who never said one thing while meaning another or being mean to another.

Then what does Christ mean when He says that His words are one cause of people's hatred? How can this be if His words were not arrogant or selfish or mean or hypocritical? The problem is that before Christ came and spoke, people could get by with relatively worldly "goodness" and they could have a little arrogance, but not too much; a little selfishness, but not too much; a little meanness, a little hypocrisy. So they could be thought of as good because of their slight self-limitation of their thoughts and actions, but they still had a substandard morality. They attempted to keep the letter of the law with great failure and had no knowledge of the spirit of the law. After Christ came this was revealed for what it is, sin, and people hated the exposure. Christ's and God's words reveal our true selves and we do not like the revelation.

Now there is a second reason why the world hates Christ, and that is His works.

**John 15:24** "If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would have no sin; but now they have seen and also hated both Me and My Father."

In this case, as in the previous verses, it is not that people were sinless before Christ's coming. That is clearly untrue. It is that His works, like His words,

brought sin to light. Christ's works refers to His miracles and to all that He does, as when He praised the Father saying in John 17:4, "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do."

The distinct characteristic of this term is that the works are God's works. And thus we find Christ saying in John 5:19, "Then Jesus answered and said to them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner.'" And just before healing the man who had been born blind, He said in John 9:4, "I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work."

So when we put the term works in this context, we see that the works of Jesus are the works of God and therefore the revelation of God. And the works of God and the revelation of God are brought to their proper climax in the ministry of Jesus.

This is precisely why the world hates Jesus. It hates Him because He was doing the works of God. And the works of God, like the words of God, reveal our spiritual bankruptcy. Before we had Jesus' works for comparison, our works looked pretty good, but next to His deeds, even the best of ours look quite shabby. The bottom line then is the hatred of the world for Christ's followers may be reduced to this: The world hates Christ's followers because it hates Christ and the world hates Christ because it hates God the Father.

Who wants hatred anyway? Well, I do not want hatred. You do not want hatred. Who wants persecution? Same there. Would it not be better to simply walk a bit closer to the world and its ways and so escape the world's judgment? I do not know if there is a person in this room or within the sound of my voice who has not done that, at least slightly, if not more so. That reaction seems wise to those who have not been called, but to think that you would have to willfully ignore the fact that God is assessing of the situation. Disregard God, and the option of a pleasant and favored life seems preferable, but acknowledge God, give attention to His judgment, and the balance changes.

What is God's judgment? It is suggested in verse 25, in which Christ quotes from the Old Testament, saying,

**John 15:25** "But this happened that the word might be fulfilled which is written in their law, 'They hated Me without a cause.'"

The quotation here is either from Psalm 35:19 or Psalm 69:4. There are bits and pieces from each.

Here, God Himself expresses a judgment upon the world's hatred of Christ and Christ's followers, saying that it is entirely without cause, groundless, unfair, and without any justification. The world is therefore guilty of willful rejection of its Creator and Sustainer, and His followers. God will move against those who have hatred and ignored His Son and He will judge them. He will receive and honor those who have faithfully walked with Jesus Christ and who, in perseverance and conviction, have endured the world's ridicule with Him. The favor of the world is not worthy to be compared with the favor of God toward His own and the world's friendship and all its amusement cannot compare with our fellowship with Jesus Christ.

**James 4:4** Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

There is a cost of discipleship which means leaving everything that might deter us from God's will for our life in following Jesus. Jesus stated the cost clearly. For example, at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in those verses that delineate the character of those who should be His disciples, Jesus says,

**Matthew 5:10-12** "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile you 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."

Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven. That is what we concentrate on, not what the effect of persecution or what man can do to us. In these verses, Jesus indicates that the normal expectation for one who follows Him is persecution.

Moreover, this is what the disciples who listened to Jesus on that occasion learned from Him and remembered vividly. Thus we find that the beatitude about persecution is quoted twice in I Peter. Once in chapter 3, verse 4 and once in chapter 4, verse 14.

**I Peter 3:13-17** And who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. "And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled." But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks for a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

I am going to repeat that because it is extremely important: *For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.* You do not get the same reward for suffering for doing evil. You reap what you sow.

We should always be ready to provide a rationale for our faith, but we should do so engagingly and righteously. And if we keep a good conscience, any accusations against us will prove baseless and our accusers shamed. It is sometimes God's will that we suffer for doing good.

**I Peter 4:12-13** Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.

That is a command. It is a promise and a command. A promise that if we obey God and follow Jesus and live Their way of life, we will receive these blessings. And one of those blessings is being able to rejoice and being glad and have exceeding joy.

**I Peter 4:14** If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but you on your part He is glorified.

The suffering is the norm for Christians, not a surprising exception. To suffer as a Christian is a call to rejoice as a disciple of Christ. Such joy is the prelude to the joy that is to come at the return of Christ when His glory is revealed. To be insulted because we belong to Christ is to be blessed by God because in such times the Spirit of glory, the Holy Spirit, rests upon us in an especially powerful way. This is the same Spirit that rested on Jesus and now rests upon us.

Paul, who had himself endured much persecution, writes to Timothy to forewarn him that to live a godly life in Christ guarantees some form of persecution.

**II Timothy 3:10-12** But you have carefully followed my doctrine, matter of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me. Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

So Paul completes the story of the things in which Timothy has shared and will share with him by speaking of the experiences of an apostle and he prefaces that list of experiences by setting down the quality of endurance. Christians must endure and persevere, and that is only done through conviction with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Perseverance and patience in some translations is translated from the Greek word *hupomone*, which means a triumphant facing of challenges, so that even out of evil there can become good. It is the opposite of a passive sitting

down and bearing things. It describes the spirit that conquers it. That quality of conquering endurance is necessary because persecution is an essential part of the experience of a minister. They were even more on the chopping block than a lay member.

Paul cites three instances when he had to suffer for Christ: he was driven from Antioch, he had to flee from Iconium to avoid lynching, in Lystra he was stoned and left for dead. All these things happened to Paul in the district of which Timothy was a native and Timothy may have been an eyewitness of them. It may be a motive for Timothy's courage and dedication; that he had seen very clearly what could happen to a minister of God, but had not hesitated to dedicate himself to God's service with Paul.

You men, has it ever crossed your mind that "Well, I don't think I would want to be a minister. They get persecuted" or "they get a lot of flak" or "they get criticized." I hope not because we should have the opposite attitude from that. The opposite attitude is this one here in this sermon.

All these things happened to Paul in the district in which Timothy was native. Now it is Paul's conviction that the real follower of Christ cannot escape persecution and when trouble fell on the Thessalonians, Paul wrote to them that he had forewarned them that the Christian life would be distressing.

**I Thessalonians 3:1-4** Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know.

It is as if he said to them, "You have been well warned" or "you have been forewarned." So there is no doubt in the Scriptures that we are told ahead of time that the cost of discipleship is that we must be willing to receive any kind of persecution, even unto death.

So they returned after the first missionary journey to visit the churches he had founded and,

**Acts 14:22** [Luke writes that Paul strengthened] . . . the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God."

The Kingdom has its great cost. Discipleship has its great cost. We, in this society, have been able to have freedom of religion fairly thoroughly until recently, when the world seems to be going after Christians with a vengeance. That is one of the main reasons I am giving this sermon at this time because the future does not look good for the world. We have a wonderful future to look to.

If anyone is willing to accept a set of standards different from the world's, he is bound to encounter trouble. And if anyone is willing to introduce into his life a loyalty that surpasses all earthly loyalties, there are bound to be clashes and that is exactly what God's way of life demands a person must do. Persecution and hardships will come. But Paul is sure of two things. One, that God will rescue the person who puts his faith in Him. He is sure that in the long run it is better to suffer with God and the right than to prosper with people and the wrong. We can be sure of temporary persecution and equally as sure of ultimate glory. The second thing Paul mentions is that he is sure that the ungodly person will go from bad to worse and that there is no future for the person who refuses to accept the way of God.

We are to live worthy of our spiritual possessions. We do not hold our possessions in Christ through any virtue of our own. What we have, we only have from the King of kings. But having it, we must live worthy of our calling. Old things must be put away and all things must be made new.

**Philippians 1:27-30** [the caption at the head of this section, in my Bible, says "Striving and Suffering for Christ] Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to

them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God. For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear is in me.

Earlier, Paul spoke to the Philippians of the privileges that we have in Christ and here he speaks of our obligations. We are obligated, we are duty bound to do this. Are we fulfilling our duties as Christians? Do we stand together against increasing opposition? Are we faithful in prayer? Do we draw together in love? Are we one in mind and purpose? If these things are true, we will be mature Christians because our conduct will be worthy of our calling and all of us need this emphasis on Christian conduct.

Perhaps there has never been a period in history when true Christians have lived more like those of the world and have demonstrated so little of the high standards of God's way of life. I have no need to describe to you the Laodicean attitude, which no doubt is rampant throughout the Christian world. It must be resisted and the only way that it will ever be possible to resist it is in the way we live our life. Privilege implies responsibilities, and if we have been called by Christ, we must now live worthy of that calling.

It is along exactly these lines that Jesus speaks of persecution in the verses that open John 16. He has already spoken of persecution once in John 15:18-25 that we read through twice, but here He returns to the same theme explaining that He has done this in order to forewarn and thus forearm His disciples. There it is again, being forewarned.

**John 16:1-4** "These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble. They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me. But these things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them. And these things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you."

These verses are a continuation of the disclosure of the coming hatred of the world for Christ's followers recorded in the previous chapter. But they are

not merely a repetition of what was said earlier. They have an emphasis of their own. One new emphasis is the specifics of the coming persecutions, excommunication, and murder. The other quite startling revelation is that these will be inflicted upon the disciples, not by the secular world necessarily, but by religious persons.

The first matter, then, is this penalty of disfellowship or excommunication, which Christ indicates by saying here in verse 2, "they will put you out of the synagogues" [or the churches or the fellowships or whatever might contain God's people or mainstream Christians]. To gain the full force of this we must understand that exclusion from the synagogue was not at all like a person being denied membership in a local church congregation today.

To be denied membership or even to be put out of it for one reason or another is not as serious today in its social impact. Spiritually, it is another matter of course. There are always other church groups and if worse comes to worse and you are unable to gain admission to any church (maybe you have burned all your bridges), it is still no big loss socially because it is possible to function in American society or the societies of the world in general without any church membership. Not too many hundred years ago, you had to be Catholic in Europe or you did not have social abilities in the same way.

This was not the case in the matter of excommunication from the Jewish synagogue. For one thing, excommunication meant separation from the spiritual life of Israel, but for the one who was excommunicated, there would be no worship, no sacrifices, not even the reading of the Scriptures, because the Bible was not as available to normal people. To be excommunicated meant losing those benefits and more besides. The banning of an individual from the synagogue would have a devastating effect upon his social life and his economic well being. Former friends would shun him, considering him worse than a pagan. He would be exiled from his family, ostracized. He would lose his job, or else if he was self-employed, his customers, and he would even be refused the right of an honorable burial.

So in speaking of excommunication from the synagogue, Jesus was warning His disciples against a threat with terrible consequences. The unique thing about this and the following example of murder, is that according to Christ,

the persecution was to come from religious people. In this case, from Judaism's spiritual leaders. This is worth noting because it is a fact that persecution often comes from religious superiors. That makes it so much more emotionally devastating. Persecution can also be bad if it comes from the secular world of course, but it does not strike us at the same point because it is more of an external persecution.

Let me give you a current case in point. Some of the things that are already in progress of being implemented and the likely direction things are headed would be unimaginable 18 months ago. Many deceitful fascist world leaders, media marionettes, and medical frauds are promoting severe punishment for the unvaccinated. One CNN anchor recently suggested that the unvaccinated be barred from buying food and have their driver's license taken away taken away. Are CNN and other media puppets actually saying it is acceptable to make 166 million U.S. residents homeless and starve them to death in order to *theoretically* prevent the spread of an infection that so far has had a 99.74% survival rate?

In his August 1, 2021 article, "Mob Morality and the Unvaxxed," Charles Eisenstein, an independent author and essayist, asks, "Why is fascism so commonly associated with genocide? He observes that it is because it needs a unifying force powerful enough to sweep aside all resistance.

So to understand secular persecution today, it is helpful to be aware of some of what has come before our time as well. Here are a few examples from Eisenstein's article.

We would like to think that modern societies like ours have outgrown barbaric customs like human sacrifice. We do not actually kill people in hopes of placating the gods and restoring order, or do we? . . .

Not just any victim will do as an object of human sacrifice. Victims must be in but not of [in but not of, I'll repeat] the society. That is why during the Black Death, mobs roamed about murdering Jews for poisoning the wells. . . .

The entire Jewish population of Basel was burned alive, a scene repeated throughout Western Europe. Yet this was not mainly the result of preexisting virulent hatred of the Jews, waiting for an excuse to erupt. It was that victims were needed to release social tension, and hatred, an instrument of that release, coalesced opportunistically on the Jews. . . .

Combating hatred is combating a symptom. Scapegoats needn't be guilty, but they must be marginal, outcast, heretics, taboo breakers, or infidels of one kind or another. If they are not already marginal, they must be made so. . . .

Defying left-right categorization is a promising new scapegoat class, the heretics of our time: the anti-vaxxers. As a readily identifiable sub-population, they are ideal candidates for scapegoating. It matters little whether any of these pose a real threat to society. Their guilt is irrelevant to the project of restoring order through blood sacrifice. . . .

All that is necessary is that the dehumanized class arouse the blind indignation and rage necessary to incite paroxysm of unifying violence. More relevant to current times, this primal mob energy can be harnessed towards fascistic political ends. . . .

Sacrificial subjects carry an association of pollution or contagion and their removal thus cleanses society.

The public's ready acceptance of such blatant censorship cannot be explained solely in terms of its believing the pretext of controlling misinformation. Unconsciously the public recognizes and conforms to the age-old program of investing a pariah subclass with the symbology of pollution. . . .

This program is well underway toward the Covid-unvaxxed who are being portrayed as walking cesspools of germs who might contaminate the Sanctified Brethren (the vaccinated).

To prepare someone for removal as the repository of all that is evil, it helps to heap upon them every imaginable calumny [which means denigration]. Thus we hear in mainstream publications that anti-vaxxers not only are killing people, but are raging narcissists, . . . and tantamount to domestic terrorists.

This is very sobering, especially since at least 40% of the general Christian population in the United States, excluding Catholics, do not want to get the COVID-19 vaccine and are a major part of the new scapegoat class called the anti-vaxxers.

Persecution can be quite bad coming from the secular world, but in a sense, it assaults us externally. When persecution comes from the religious authorities it strikes us inwardly because the argument is always that they, not we, are the true church and have the true religion. It is the persecuted one that is always called a heretic and sometimes he is. Consequently, the persecuted one, if he is at all honest or even a bit humble, must find himself asking, are the authorities right? Can I actually be on the right track with all this great weight of opinion and tradition against me? What do I do in these circumstances?

Persecutors always claim to be the true church, the people of God. But the claim alone does not make it true. There is an old German proverb that says, "Not all who carry long knives are cooks." In the same way, not all who lay claim to the title church are the true church and not all who preach sermons are God's ministers.

Who are God's ministers? They are those who teach from the Bible, which is the inspired written Word of God, as the only standard to live by. On that standard one can correctly ask, what are the doctrines they teach as the Bible presents them? We must be willing to stand by what the Holy Scriptures teach us, not by what human traditions tell us. The true church is composed of those who believe in Christ, not just *about* Him. If God, in His infinite wisdom, permits those who merely profess the name of church to excommunicate and persecute or otherwise relegate to the sidelines those who are determined to live by the Bible's authority, it is a fulfillment of

Christ's words about being put out. Our task is to willingly be forewarned and to faithfully persevere and guard the truth according to the inspired written Word of God.

Now, the second specific mention by Jesus Christ is murder. Obviously this is not always the experience of Christ's followers. Jesus speaks only of a *time* when this will happen, but it has been far more common than most people realize when you look back at church history. In the early years, some of the apostles and many normal believers were killed. In fact, all but one of the apostles (John was the only one that we know of), were killed by the Jewish authorities and by the Jewish instigation. Later, execution was inflicted by Rome, at first in random fashion and then in a more systematic way, as in the cities of Lyon and Vienna in southern France. Under Decius and Diocletian the killing of Christians became the policy of the empire. Persecutions filled the Middle Ages, as were followed by martyrdom.

The interesting dimension in all of this is that the killing of Christians is almost entirely by religious people and for religious reasons. It is as Christ said in John 16, verse 2, which we read, "Anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God."

But how should a member of God's church view trials, tragedy, and persecution? We must remember righteous Job's perspective. Already in a physical and emotional posture of grief, Job is struck with sores, and his wife's question, to which he responds further in grief and trust in God. Although the reference of Job's wife is very brief, the content of her speech is significant for how it relates to the heavenly dialogue and for what this connection reveals about the nature of her comments.

Her rhetorical question doubts the sensibility of the very thing God finds commendable about Job, "Do you still hold fast to your integrity?" And her suggested response advises Job to take the action Satan was looking to provoke, "Curse God and die!" Job's response to his wife was a measured rebuke. He does not presume to know her heart fully, but warns her against speaking like one of the foolish women. Let us review and pick up the story in its context.

**Job 2:7-10** So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and struck Job with painful boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. And he took himself a potsherd with which to scrape himself while he sat in the midst of the ashes. Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die!" But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

Having received such abundant blessings and kindness from God prior to this, it was unreasonable to complain when they were taken away and when God sends tragedy instead. Should we not expect it? Should we not be willing to bear it when it comes? Should we not have sufficient confidence in Him to believe that His dealings are ordered in goodness and justice on our behalf? Should we immediately lose all our confidence in our great God at the moment He takes away our comforts, allows us to be afflicted.

This is the true expression of virtue. It submits to *all* of the will of God without complaint. Virtue receives blessings with gratitude and it is accepting when trials and catastrophes are sent or allowed in their place.

Virtue esteems life as a mere favor to be permitted to breathe the air which God has made. To look at the light of His Son and feel its warmth. To walk through His forest, to inhale the fragrance of His flowers, and to enjoy friendship with those God calls. And when He takes one or all away, it means that He has taken only what belongs to Him and withdraws a privilege from what He first gave us.

**Lamentations 3:38-41** Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that woe and well-being proceed? Why should a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins? Let us search out and examine our ways, and turn back to the Lord; let us lift our hearts and hands to God in heaven.

Why should a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins? That merely says that sometimes we bring it upon ourselves. Why should we

complain to God when we have done it to ourselves? What right has a sinner to complain when God withdraws His blessing and subjects him to suffering? What claim do we have on God that should see it as wrong for Him to test and try us, to prove us? Quite often our complaint may seem that it is directed into the air or it is directed at someone else, but ultimately it is really directed at God.

Let us begin to wrap this up. What is it that can allow a true Christian to rejoice in persecutions, even such severe persecutions as the ones Christ mentions? There are several hopeful answers.

First, persecution demonstrates to us and others that we are identified with Christ, as I mentioned earlier. This is involved in Christ's explanation of the world's conduct in John 16:3, that we recently read. "These things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me." In other words, here is another statement that emphasizes the radical distinction between Christ's own and the world. On the one side is the world which knows itself, but which does not know God. On the other side are the faithful who are known of God and who know God, but who are not known by the world, and are in fact, even hated by it. To be hated by the world that does not know either the Father or Christ is therefore a glorious mark of being identified with both of Them.

Second, we can rejoice in persecutions because we know that they are not accidents, but rather that God has certain purposes. Christ tells us of the persecutions to come in order that we should not be offended, as He says. And that when the time comes, we might, in Christ's words, "Remember that I warned you." This means that through the coming persecutions, our faith will be strengthened.

Another purpose is growth in practical holiness, because persecutions strip away the unnecessary garbage in our lives and draw us closer to God the Father and Jesus Christ. Peter knew this and he had heard Christ teach it and then he experienced it in his own life and in the lives of those who had come to faith under his ministry. So when some of these people went through persecutions, he wrote to them about it.

**I Peter 1:6-8** In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory.

Peter was pointing out that persecution is the crucible in which God purifies the precious part of our lives.

The third reason why we can rejoice in persecutions, according to Peter, is that they, more than anything else, allow the faithful to demonstrate the supernatural radiance of God's way of life. If all is going well in your life and you rejoice, what is so remarkable about that, other than that God has just blessed you and you can appreciate the blessings? But if all goes wrong and you rejoice, that is remarkable, and others will notice.

Paul and Silas sang praises to God at midnight in the jail in Philippi. The jailer had seen many prisoners, he had seen sullen prisoners and rebellious prisoners and dejected prisoners, but you can be sure that he had never seen prisoners who could rejoice amid severe beatings and captivity as Paul and Silas were doing.

So when God opened the gates of the prison with an earthquake and the prisoners chains were loosed at the appropriate time to allow faithful Paul and Silas to witness to them and leave, the jailer fell at their feet demanding, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" What a powerful example they were. And God called the jailer. They had glorified God by their conviction of faith and attitude of joy amid persecution, beating, and imprisonment. The jailer's eyes were opened and later he was baptized.

We do not know how or when God will use us in maybe a significant way to glorify Him by living His way of life through persecution and affliction with with gladness and joy. But we have been forewarned that this is our duty and that we should not complain about it, but we should rejoice in it.

**Psalm 90:13-17** Return O Lord! How long? And have compassion on your servants. Oh, satisfy us early with Your mercy, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days! Make us glad according to the days in which You have afflicted us, the years in which we have seen evil.