

## The Beatitudes, Part 8: Blessed Are The Persecuted

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Persecution! The very word can generate vivid images of hiding in terror of pursuing, implacable foes; of being found and resolutely facing the excruciating pain of torture meant to cause renunciation of cherished beliefs; and finally—hopefully—following faithful resistance to every agonizing constraint to deny the faith, of death. Others imagine a courtroom scene where one endures a penetrating inquisition before ecclesiastical or civil authorities. Some think of the Roman Coliseum filled with people raucously cheering as hungry lions chase down defenseless Christians; of people lashed to a stake as piled wood is lighted beneath them; or of a person chained in a dark, dank jail with rats scurrying about his feet. Each of these images can be a dreadful, unwanted result of our faith in God, yet Jesus calls those persecuted for righteousness' sake "blessed." Such people will be greatly rewarded!

This seems far removed from God's multitudinous promises of peace, prosperity and deliverance. Some think it an enigma or contradictory that a God of endless love and limitless power can even say such things, let alone seem to do nothing while His innocent and faithful children are undeservedly, cruelly and painfully harassed, tormented and mocked. As unjust as this seems on the surface, it is part of God's Word and His way of life. In no way does it invalidate His love or negate His purpose or care of His children. The Bible records so much persecution of His servants that, understood in the right context, we can see that it serves a vital role in the outworking of His purpose.

*Strong's Concordance* reveals that "persecute" (Greek *dioko*) means "to pursue, follow after or press toward." *Vine's Expository Dictionary* adds "to put to flight or drive away." Only within certain contexts does it take on the sense of oppression, ill treatment, abuse, tyranny and even martyrdom and murder. Persecution is aggressive and injurious behavior carried out in a hostile, antagonistic spirit, normally by a group, but occasionally by one individual toward another. It is often carried out with fiery zeal, as Paul remarks about his persecution of the church (Philippians 3:6), but the persecuted must always remember that the fiery zeal bent against them is, according to Romans 10:2, "not according to knowledge." Thus Jesus, while dying on the stake, asks His Father to forgive His persecutors, "for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34).

### Source and Focus

In the Bible, especially in the New Testament, persecution is so pervasive that it is presented as a more or less expected terror. Jesus, the epitome of righteousness, is also the focal point of persecution. As such, He clearly reveals persecution's source. In John 8 the Pharisees challenge Jesus' assertion of who He was, and the ensuing discussion leads to revealing its source.

The Jews claim to be Abraham's descendants and never in bondage to any man (though at the time they were subject to the Romans). Their statement is partly true. Jesus readily acknowledges they are physically Abraham's descendants, but He adds in verse 40, "But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this." He implies that, if they were truly Abraham's children, their conduct would display his characteristics, and they would not be persecuting Him. He continues:

You do the deeds of your father. . . . You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it. (verses 41, 44)

Satan the Devil is the source of persecution of those bearing and living the truth of God. At times he undoubtedly works through people whom he has duped and inflamed to unrelenting anger toward God's people so that the persecution appears to be entirely of men. But the Bible reveals the reality of Satan as the source.

Revelation 12:3-5, 13-17 confirms this:

And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born. She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and to His throne. . . . Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child. But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.

Here, the church bears the brunt of Satan's persecution. The church, however, is also the body of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23), that group of people in whom Christ is being formed (Galatians 4:19). Jesus warns us that this will occur:

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)

Thus, because of our relationship to Jesus Christ, persecution becomes our lot in life. Luke movingly describes this sense of solidarity and union with Christ during Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. Christ calls out, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:4). Just three verses earlier, he writes, "Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest." Paul had physically and psychologically abused the members of the church, but Christ considers any attack against His church to be an attack against Himself personally.

His disciples can count on persecution. In fact, persecution serves as a sign of the authenticity of his relationship to Jesus Christ, as Philippians 1:27-30 attests:

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.

The Bible also shows that the disciple's response to persecution is a veritable litmus test to determine that authenticity. Notice these two passages:

» But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles. (Matthew 13:20-21)

» Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved. (Matthew 24:9-13)

Clearly, God will count as righteous those who respond to persecution in faith.

### **Forms of Persecution**

Biblically, persecution is primarily of a religious nature. However, ethnic persecution appears in the book of Esther. In spiritual contexts, though, persecution takes on a number of forms:

**Beating** : I gave My back to those who struck Me, and My cheeks to those who plucked out the beard; I did not hide My face from shame and spitting. (Isaiah 50:6)

**Stoning** : Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. (Acts 14:19)

**Mocking** : Then Herod, with his men of war, treated Him with contempt and mocked Him, arrayed Him in a gorgeous robe, and sent Him back to Pilate. (Luke 23:11)

**Insults** : Because zeal for Your house has eaten me up, and the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on me. (Psalm 69:9)

**Slander** : I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. (Revelation 2:9)

**Ostracism** : His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue. (John 9:22)

**Intimidation and threats** : So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way of punishing them, because of the people, since they all glorified God for what had been done. . . . "Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your Word." (Acts 4:21, 29)

**Imprisonment** : For Herod himself had sent and laid hold of John, and bound him in

prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; for he had married her. (Mark 6:17)

**Exile** : I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. (Revelation 1:9)

And finally, **death** . God's Word records so many of these that it would be futile to list them. From righteous Abel in Genesis to the prophetic record of Revelation, Satan has hounded the righteous even to death in his frenetic, insane attempts to destroy God's purpose and plan and overcome Jesus Christ.

### Wrong Responses

II Timothy 3:12 plainly states, "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution." It is inevitable that the truly righteous must face it, and God exhorts us to respond positively. He condemns negative reactions:

**Fear** : But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. "And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled." (I Peter 3:14)

**Compromise** : As many as desire to make a good showing in the flesh, these try to compel you to be circumcised, only that they may not suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. (Galatians 6:12)

**Cursing** : Bless those which persecute you; bless and do not curse. (Romans 12:14)

**Desertion** : "But all this [Christ's betrayal and arrest] was done that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples forsook Him and fled. (Matthew 26:56)

**Retaliation** : Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. "Therefore, if your enemy hungers, feed him; if he thirsts, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:17-21)

**Apostasy** : But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. Therefore do not cast away your confidence which has great reward. . . . But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul. (Hebrews 10:32-35, 39)

Every one of these wrong reactions destroys our witness for God, our character and our loyalty. Since persecution comes on all who live godly in Christ Jesus, it is no wonder God places so much emphasis on it. Persecution plays a vital role in God's purpose.

### Righteousness and Persecution

This beatitude presents us with yet another paradox. The other beatitudes show that a Christian can be filled with a joy that he cannot fully express, yet lament over things that the carnal consider as

insignificant. He has a deep and abiding sense of satisfaction, yet groans daily and sincerely. His life experiences are often painful, yet he would not part with them for the great wealth, acclaim and ease the world offers. Though the world exalts those filled with pride, self-esteem and assertiveness, God exalts the humble and meek. The world displays its approval for war-makers by giving them ticker tape parades, putting them into high office and remembering their achievement by naming streets, cities, parks and schools after them—yet God blesses the peacemakers. Understanding these earlier paradoxes among the Beatitudes, this one states that all we will receive for doing well is to earn the antipathy of fellow man.

We need to understand the connection between righteousness and persecution because not every sufferer or even every sufferer of religious persecution suffers for righteousness' sake. Many suffer persecution for zealously holding fast to what is clearly a false religion. Often, a rival religious group or civil authority—just as ignorant of God's truth—are the persecutors. At any given time persecutions of one form or another are taking place. In the recent past the Japanese persecuted the Koreans and the Chinese, the Nepalese. In Africa the Moslem Sudanese are persecuting "Christians," while in Europe the Slavic Eastern Orthodox "Christians" are persecuting Moslem Kosovars. In the history of man, this familiar beat of persecution continues endlessly with nary a connection to righteousness.

Some people become victims of their own character flaws and personality disorders. They foolishly take comfort in Matthew 5:10-12, claiming persecution when others merely retaliate against their displays of evil speaking, haughtiness or self-centeredness. Such people are just reaping what they have sown.

Psalms 119:172 says, "My tongue shall speak of Your word; for all Your commandments are righteousness." This is a simple, straightforward definition of righteousness. It is rectitude, right doing. God's commands thus describe how to live correctly. They teach us how to conduct relationships with Him and fellow man. This beatitude is written about those who are truly doing this. They will receive persecution, and it will be because they are living correctly—not because they have irritated or infuriated others through their sins or because they belong to another political party, religion or ethnic group.

Does anything illustrate the perversity of human nature clearer than this? We might think that one could hardly be more pleased than to have neighbors who are absolutely trustworthy; who will not murder, commit adultery or fornication, steal, lie or covet one's possessions; who rear respectful children; who are an asset to the neighborhood; who so respect God they will not even use His name in vain; who submit to the civil laws and do not even flaunt the codes and covenants of the neighborhood.

However, this description does not mention the relationship to God that really brings the persecution. These are things moral people of this world might do, yet they lack the true God in their lives and are not regenerated by His Spirit. An element of righteousness is still missing. Paul writes in Romans 8: 14-17:

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by which we cry out, "Abba Father." The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.

The source of true persecution is Satan, and its target is God. Satan not only hates God, he also hates all who bear His holy image in them by means of His Spirit. Satan works in and through people just as God does, and he incites them to do all in their power to vilify, destroy the reputation of, put fear in or discourage God's children to cause their disqualification. He will do anything to get us to respond, to retaliate, as worldly people do, because then we would display Satan's image rather than Jesus Christ's. Satan knows those who have the Spirit of God, and just as he tempted Jesus, he will also single out His brothers and sisters for persecution.

The righteousness needed to resist these pressures and respond in a godly manner goes far beyond that of a merely moral person. This righteousness requires that one be living by faith minute by minute, day by day, week by week, month by month and year by year. It is one ingrained into a person's very character because he knows God. He is intimately acquainted with Him and His purpose rather than merely believing academically that He exists.

Following on the heels of this beatitude is another statement by Jesus on righteousness: "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). He focuses on a righteousness that is not merely legal, resulting from God graciously justifying us by Christ's blood, but one inculcated within the heart and mind by constantly living God's way. Such a person's righteousness comes of sanctification. He is striving to keep all the commandments of God, not merely those having to do with public morality. He has made prayer and study a significant part of each day along with occasional fasting to assist in keeping humble. He is well on his way toward the Kingdom of God. These are not normally things that one does publicly; his neighbors may never know much of this person's life. Nonetheless, Satan knows, and this person's living faith will attract Satan's persecution, the Devil's attempts to derail him from making it.

### **For Righteousness' Sake**

Jesus' phrase in the beatitude, "for righteousness' sake," calls upon us to examine ourselves honestly before God both before and after we are opposed. Notice I Peter 4:12-16:

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. 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 on your part He is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.

Peter, like Jesus, perceives persecution as inevitable and therefore a Christian should expect it. Since a disciple is not above His Master, a follower can hardly expect to escape some form of what the Master received.

Human nature dislikes and is suspicious of anyone who is different. True Christianity brings on its own form of unpopularity. It has never been easy, in part because, regardless of where they live, Christians are different. A Christian presents the standard of Jesus Christ to the world. Worldly witnesses to this do not understand exactly why, but it at least irritates them, pricks their conscience and separates them from the Christian. In some it leads to open anger, even rage. For instance, while

calling it a virtue, worldly people think goodness is a handicap because they fear it will keep them from achieving their goals. At the same time, a truly good person will irritate them. Before long, their conscience disturbs them, and they react by persecuting the good person. The human heart is so deceitful that Jesus remarks in John 16:2, "They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service."

Peter also perceives persecution as a trial to overcome. A person's devotion to principle can be measured by his willingness to suffer for it. Therefore, since he writes of true Christians and not those merely in name, persecution will be a test. Compromising with God's standards will not elicit persecution because that leads to agreement with the world. Jesus says, "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" (John 15:19). Compromise will certainly ease the pressure, but God intends persecution to test the Christian's trust, loyalty, sincerity, courage and patience.

Suffering for righteousness' sake is an honor leading to glory. In fact, Peter says that when one suffers persecution, the glory of God rests upon them. When Stephen was put on trial, his accusers "saw his face as the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15)! In such an instance, a persecuted Christian falls into the same category as Jesus Christ because all He suffered was for righteousness' sake. We therefore share in the same and should be unashamed.

However, we must be exceedingly careful we do not suffer because of our own misconduct. A Christian's life should be his best argument that he does not deserve what is happening to him. Jesus says in Matthew 5:11, "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you *falsely* for My sake." We hope that we suffer for our sins only rarely, but when we do, we are getting what we deserve. There is no glory in that. But even in this, all is not lost because it may lead to repentance, change and growth.

### **The Human Source of Persecution**

Persecution can come from a wide variety of sources. One of the most likely is within our own homes and/or families. Christ remarks in Matthew 10:34-36:

Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to "set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." And "a man's foes will be those of his own household."

Less frequently, our employers may persecute us. Many have found themselves persecuted on the job because of keeping the Sabbath. A severe form of this is prophesied to happen to those who do not have the mark of the Beast (Revelation 13:16-18).

At times, we may receive social persecution within a community. We are often excluded from friendships that would normally be extended to us as they are to others who are not of the truth. Sometimes our children face this more directly in school than we do in the neighborhood or market place.

Without a doubt, the most intense persecution begins with those of a religious bent and culminates with the civil authorities. Christ received His most frequent attacks from the religious leaders, those with the greatest spiritual pretensions. The scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees all attempted to

ostracize Him or destroy the validity of His teaching. In the end, the ecclesiastical authorities called upon the civil authorities to administer the savage beating and execution. As the Beast arises, we can expect its persecution to follow the same pattern.

### **Great Is Your Reward**

It may seem strange that Jesus passes so quickly from peacemaking in the previous beatitude to persecution—from the work of reconciliation to the experience of hostility. But we come to learn from life's experiences following conversion that, however hard we try to live peacefully or to make peace through reconciliation, some refuse to live at peace with us. Indeed, as this beatitude shows, some take the initiative to oppose, revile and slander us. We must live with and adjust to the fact that persecution is simply the clash between two *irreconcilable* value systems. God has called us, selected us, to represent Him in patiently enduring and even overcoming persecution as part of our witness and preparation for His Kingdom.

God is not without sympathy for the difficulties these challenges pose for us, but He calls us blessed, counseling us to "rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is [our] reward in heaven" for successfully overcoming persecution. We should realize we do not earn the reward because we are doing only what we are supposed to do (Luke 17:7-10). But God freely gives the reward; He promises it as His gift.

We are to face persecution remembering "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). When it comes upon us, we should not retaliate like the world, sulk like a child, lick our wounds like a dog in self-pity, or simply grin and bear it like a masochistic Stoic. Our Savior tells us to rejoice in it because it proves the authenticity of our faith, puts us into a noble succession of towering figures of faith who have preceded us, and guarantees us great reward in the Kingdom. It may also put us into the company of many martyrs exalted in God's Word.

Above all, persecution for His sake brings us into fellowship with the sufferings of our Savior. Our love for Christ should be so great that we rejoice that it has come upon us on His account. If He suffered so much to give us this awesome future, why should we not gladly suffer a little for Him?

Persecution is a blessing in disguise designed to bring out the best of Christian character. From it we frequently become aware of weaknesses in our character. Persecution's pressures are humbling. They make us understand that our spiritual infirmities are so great that we cannot stand for a single hour unless Christ upholds us. How true are His words, "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Persecution can also keep us from certain sins because it makes us more vividly aware of the impossibility of friendship with the world. Seeing we cannot have both the world and the Kingdom, it can help us set our resolve to live righteously. "And not only that," the apostle Paul writes in Romans 5:3-4, "but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope."

At first glance, persecution seems contradictory to the way and purpose of God. Though we certainly do not wish it upon anyone, and though we sincerely hope we do not have to face it, we can understand in the broad overview that, because of the enmity of Satan, it is inevitable. And in reality, it is a disguised blessing, designed to complete our preparation for God's Kingdom.