

“Blessed Are the Persecuted”
(Matthew 5:11-12)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. One of the unpleasant consequences of following Christ is persecution, at least from one perspective.
 - a. No one likes to be ridiculed, slandered, injured, imprisoned, or executed.
 - b. But this is what Jesus warned us would happen.
 - (i) “Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you” (1 John 3:13).
 - (ii) “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before *it hated* you. 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, because of this the world hates you” (John 15:18-19).
 - (iii) The more we are like Him, the more we will be persecuted: “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12).
2. The important thing is that we persevere through it.
 - a. It is the one who endures to the end, who will be saved (Matt. 24:13).
 - b. Falling away because of persecution is a good indicator that we don’t belong to Him: “The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no *firm* root in himself, but is *only* temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away” (Matt. 13:20-21).
 - (i) Certainly, Christians can fall away for a time.
 - (a) The disciples all ran from Christ when He was arrested (Matt. 26:56).
 - (b) Peter denied Him three times (v. 75).
 - (ii) But they won’t fall entirely or finally away.
 - (a) They will come back.
 - (b) And they will persevere to the end.
 - c. Following Jesus isn’t easy, which is why He tells us to count the cost before we begin (Luke 14:26-27):
 - (i) Are we willing to suffer for Him?
 - (ii) Are we willing to spend and be spent?
 - (iii) Are we willing to die?
 - (iv) If we give up our lives, we will gain them.
 - (v) If we hold into them, we will lose them.

B. Preview.

1. But the Lord doesn’t leave us without incentives.
 - a. He gives us a heart that loves Him and doesn’t want to do anything else.
 - b. He gives us His Spirit to strengthen us and comfort our hearts.

- c. He gives us spiritual eyes to see the reality of the things we endure for by faith (Heb. 11:1).
 - d. But He also promises us a reward.
 - (i) He says if we are persecuted, we are blessed.
 - (ii) We should rejoice, because our reward in heaven is great.
2. This morning, I would like us to consider persecution and the blessings that come from it. We'll see four things:
- a. What it is.
 - b. Why it comes.
 - c. Why we should persevere through it.
 - d. And how long we should persevere.

II. Sermon.

A. What is persecution?

1. It means to pursue someone to hurt them in some way. It can take many forms:
 - a. It can be something as mild as an insult (v. 11).
 - b. It can be more aggressive, such as a false accusation, charge, slander (v. 11).
 - c. It can include personal mistreatment and of those you love.
 - d. It can mean imprisonment, torture, and/or death.
2. Biblical examples:
 - a. There are times where God's children do great things in God's name.
 - b. But there are other when He wills they suffer: "Women received *back* their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (*men* of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground" (Heb. 11:35-38).
3. There are many examples in church history: the evening series.
 - a. Wycliffe, Hus, Tyndale, Savonarola, Tyndale, etc.
 - b. The Scottish Covenanters.
 - c. We have our own examples.

B. Why does it come into our lives.

1. In God's providence – as we saw in Sunday School this morning – for our growth in Christ.
 - a. The Lord has His reasons:
 - (i) It can be a form of chastening for sin.
 - (ii) To humble us.
 - (iii) To show us our need of Him.
 - (iv) To glorify His name by displaying the depth of love His children have for Him – not willing to deny Him, even if it means death.

- b. All of these are very good reasons.
2. But not only for, but also *because of*, our growth in Christ.
 - a. The world doesn't persecute its own, but Christians.
 - b. They do so because they hate Christ, as we've already seen (John 15:18-19).
 - c. The more you become like Christ, the more you'll be persecuted.
 - (i) "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12).
 - (ii) This is true to some degree in all ages; but increasingly so in our age.
 - (iii) *But they will only hate you if they see Christ in you.*
 - (iv) If they can see it, rejoice, because you have grown in His image.
 3. It's also a choice:
 - a. When we choose to follow Christ, we are choosing persecution – a hard road, instead of an easy one.
 - b. This is what Moses did: "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward" (Heb. 11:24-26).
 - c. That's why we must count the cost.
 - d. We can't help but follow Christ, if we are His.
- C. Why should we persevere through persecution?
1. We must if we are to be saved.
 - a. The one who endures to the end will be saved.
 - b. "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it (Matt. 16:24-25).
 - c. It is the one who dies to self, picks up his cross and follows Jesus who will be saved.
 - d. "It is a trustworthy statement: For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; if we endure, we will also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He also will deny us; if we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself" (2 Tim. 2:11-13).
 2. How can we not follow in the footsteps of our Savior.
 - a. He suffered for us more than we ever will for Him.
 - b. He's not asking us to do anything for Him that He hasn't already done for us.
 - c. "Hence we may learn how dreadful Christ's last sufferings were. We learn it from the dreadful effect which the very foresight of them had upon him in his agony. His last sufferings were so dreadful, that the view which Christ had of them before overwhelmed and amazed him, as it is said he began to be sore amazed. The very sight of these last sufferings was so very dreadful as to sink his soul down into the dark shadow of death; yea, so dreadful was it, that in the

sore conflict which his nature had with it, he was all in a sweat of blood, his body all over was covered with clotted blood, and not only his body, but the very ground under him with the blood that fell from him, which had been forced through his pores through the violence of his agony. And if only the foresight of the cup was so dreadful, how dreadful was the cup itself, how far beyond all that can be uttered or conceived! Many of the martyrs have endured extreme tortures, but from what has been said, there is all reason to think those all were a mere nothing to the last sufferings of Christ on the cross. And what has been said affords a convincing argument that the sufferings which Christ endured in his body on the cross, though they were very dreadful, were yet the least part of his last sufferings; and that beside those, he endured sufferings in his soul which were vastly greater. For if it had been only the sufferings which he endured in his body, though they were very dreadful, we cannot conceive that the mere anticipation of them would have such an effect on Christ. Many of the martyrs, for aught we know, have endured as severe tortures in their bodies as Christ did. Many of the martyrs have been crucified, as Christ was; and yet their souls have not been so overwhelmed. There has been no appearance of such amazing sorrow and distress of mind either at the anticipation of their sufferings, or in the actual enduring of them” (Edwards, *Day by Day*, 25).

3. This is also the way the Lord has ordained that the church would advance.
 - a. “The power of God is glorious, not only in preserving His church, in raising the spirits of His servants in their greatest affliction, but in increasing His church by them. If it is a wonder to be upheld in them, it is much more a wonder to be increased by them. ‘The more we are cut down, the more we persist,’ says Tertullian. The church never grew so fast as when it was under the most affliction. Sulpitius says of the Christians in the primitive times, that they were then as greedy of martyrdom, as in his time men were greedy of the bishopric. The blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church. Pliny reports of the lily, that it is increased by its own juice that drops from it, and so is the church, which is the lily that grows among the thorns; the very blood that drops from it, multiplies it; the sufferings of one beget many to the love of the truth. John Knox. . . reports of a gentleman, one John Lindsay, familiar to Bishop James Bettoune, that he said to the Bishop upon the occasion of the burning of Patrick Hamilton: ‘My Lord, if you burn any more, you will destroy yourselves; if you burn them, let them be burnt in hollow cellars, for the smoke of Mr. Patrick Hamilton has infected as many as it blew upon.’ It is reported of one Cecilia . . . that her constancy and exhortations, before and after her martyrdom, were the means to convert four hundred people. ‘By blood and prayer the church converts the whole world,’ says Luther” (Jeremiah Burroughs, *Day by Day*, 7).
 - b. The more the church is persecuted, the more it grows.
4. And the Lord promises a reward if we persevere.
 - a. The prophets will have a greater reward because they were persecuted.
 - b. The Lord says if we are persecuted and endure, we will have the same.
 - (i) There are degrees of reward, as there are of punishment.

(ii) One way it increases, is if we suffer.

D. How long should we persevere?

1. To the end.
2. Consider Noah's example.
 - a. "In these days, men are with difficulty brought to do or submit to that which makes them the objects of the reproach of all their neighbors. Indeed if while some reproach them, others stand by them and honor them, this will support them. But it is very difficult for a man to go on in a way wherein he makes himself the laughing stock of the whole world, and wherein he can find none who do not despise him. Where is the man that can stand the shock of such a trial for twenty years?"
 - b. "But in such an undertaking as this, Noah at the divine direction, engaged and went through it, that he and his family might be saved from the common destruction which was shortly to come on the world. He began, and also made an end: 'According to all that God commanded him, so did he.' Length of time did not weary him: he did not grow weary of his vast expense. He stood the shock of the derision of all his neighbors; and of all the world year after year: he did not grow weary of being their laughing –stock, so as to give over his enterprise; but persevered in it till the ark was finished. After this, he was at the trouble and charge of procuring stores for the maintenance of his family, and of all the various kinds of creatures, for so long a time. Such an undertaking he engaged in and went through in order to a temporal salvation. How great an undertaking then should men be willing to engage in and go through in order to their eternal salvation! A salvation from an eternal deluge; from being overwhelmed with the billows of God's wrath of which Noah's flood was but a shadow" (Edwards, *Day by Day*. 29).

III. Conclusion.

- A. Brothers and sisters, in the world we will have persecution.
 1. If we do what Christ calls us to do, the world will hate us.
 2. The degree depends on what the Lord has planned.
- B. But we need to persevere through it.
 1. Let's not try and avoid it.
 2. On the other hand, let's not try to stimulate it.
 3. But let's do the Lord's work in the Lord's strength, and not worry if we suffer for it.
 4. Instead, let's consider ourselves blessed, as the martyrs were, that they were counted worthy to suffer in Christ's place.
 5. "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Col. 1:24).
 6. Remember, "To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (1 Pet. 4:13-14). Amen.