



2022 Weekly Devotions

Week of: October 10th - 16th

Sermon: October 9th



October 10

John 15:19-20

Sometimes there is simply not enough time to delve into everything that a particular text has to say and that is one of the reasons why these devotions are such a wonderful avenue for continued instruction and encouragement. I do pray that these devotions will be encouraging, but I worry that you may hear the subject matter and wonder how they could serve to bolster you in your walk! As we talk about the result of casting out the demon in the slave girl or the forthcoming miracle of the conversion of the Philippian jailer in Acts 16, we must consider the reality that persecution is the reason for Paul and Silas' arrival in prison.

Stated differently, Acts 16 tells us another story of persecution. When Paul and Silas do good to the slave girl who was tormented by an indwelling demon, her owners despise them, and the reason is that the casting out of the demon in Acts 16 resulted in their loss of income! The world is an evil place, and it is inhabited by people who are at war with a good and holy God. What I'd like to do is to dive into that subject and lead us to a place where we see the reality of suffering and persecution as well as the beauty and power of our God to bring good from evil.

As we begin our subject, I want to spend two days in this passage of Scripture. Our goal will be to try to remind our souls and minds of two truths that are incredibly important and helpful in our Christian walk. First, we need to see that persecution is the inevitable result of our association with Christ. Notice in this passage how Jesus draws a straight line between His own suffering and harassment at the hands of the world and our own. The logic is simple, if we are going to be associated with Christ, we should expect to suffer the same way that He did. To associate with Jesus, to embody Jesus, to claim Jesus as our Lord is to align ourselves with One who the world despises.

In the course of unveiling this truth to us, Christ says something that I think is very important as He tells us that a "servant is not above His master". The idea is that we cannot, and should not, expect a better fate than our Lord. Many associate with Christ thinking that we are guaranteed or promised a better lifestyle than our Savior. This type of thinking elevates our own expectations above what we know our Lord endured but this is faulty thinking and unbelievably prideful. If Jesus had to endure difficulty to secure us, why wouldn't we desire and expect to endure hard times to represent and follow Him?

The beauty of this text will become clearer as we go this week! Right now you might read this and think it is quite depressing but we will see how the Lord uses beauty to bring about good and, most importantly, how the evil that we endure leads to glory that we cannot fathom. Folks, the Lord hasn't abandoned you in the hard times, He told you they were coming, but just like the Lord suffered for a little while in order to be glorified, you and I will follow in His footsteps with the same eternal joy awaiting us on the other side.

October 11

John 15:19-20

What is the cause of the world's hatred towards us? I bet many of you have asked that question before! It is easy to look at the Christian life and see the beauty of it once you have eyes to perceive reality. When I look at the church, I don't see a "threat" or "Christian nationalists" or "a cult", I see people who love the Lord, believe in truth, and exist to glorify God by serving their fellow man through Gospel proclamation and serving the needs of the community

How is it that I can see something so diametrically opposed to what the world sees? The answer is that I have spiritual eyes and they do not! What the world sees is that we are not apart of their systems. In Paul's case, the world saw that the Apostle was standing in the way of their opportunity to make money! How dare this man come in and ruin the cash cow that was that slave girl. What else might he tear down if he has the chance? What right did he have to dictate to them what was good and evil?

The point I am making is that Paul and Silas represented something that was totally different than the world and this is one of the justifications Christ offers us here for why the world hates true believers. It is "because you are not of this world" that the world hates you! Therefore, the world can embrace something as horrific as Islam and despise something as glorious as Christianity. One false religion is easily apart of the larger rule of the god of this world, but the true religion of Christianity must be shunned at all costs.

Now, I want you to make this connection here... the reason why persecution is inevitable is because we have no choice but to continue to be set apart from the world. There is no way for us to remain in Christ and return to the rule and reign of the evil one. Part and parcel of being a Christian is submitting to the Lordship of Christ, but the Lordship of Christ is EXACTLY what the world despises the most. This means we are at an impasse and conflict is inevitable.

Just like there are times in which countries must go to war (think WWII with Hitler and Japan's threat to the world) the conflict between good and evil, or more specifically, Christ and the fallen kingdom of this world, will inevitably lead to friction. Folks, if you seek to live a godly life, if you really obey the commands of your Master, if you choose to associate with the proverbial public enemy #1 that is Christ, you should expect to endure difficulty. Therefore, don't be surprised!

October 12

Matthew 5:10-12

So... why would we go through persecution? Some may read the devotions from the last two days and wonder if it's worth it. After all, nobody longs for the hatred of the masses and the inevitable consequences that come from such disdain. Is it worth it to be a Christian? The answer is a resounding yes! We have many blessings in Christ, and several are temporal. For instance, we have an ability to see, understand and savor the world that the lost man simply doesn't possess. We have the joy of spending time in true, unified fellowship. We have the joy of communing with the God of the universe through the indwelling Spirit. These are marvelous blessings, but they are just appetizers for the beauty that is to come.

If someone were to ask you why you would endure persecution, the first and foremost answer should be the beauty of what is unpacked in our text today. The reason why persecution is to be embraced and endured is because of the exceedingly beautiful and sure reward of eternal bliss and reward in God's presence. Stated differently, the sacrifice of decades of potential harm is only worth it considering the secured prospect of eternal reward in heaven.

Two truths about this passage warrant our attention. First, notice that Jesus says we are "blessed" when others revile us. How can this be? The answer is that their hatred is the proof that we are apart of the Kingdom of God. Remember what we said yesterday? The world hates us precisely because we are associated with Jesus. When the world demonstrates that hatred towards us, they are confirming our association with Christ. The very act of persecution in this sense is a testimony that we belong to the Kingdom of God and therefore it is a rich blessing.

Second, notice the realization of our hope. The reason why we are blessed is because we have great reward to anticipate... in heaven. Jesus is very clear that our blessing and reward for suffering will come, ultimately, in the next life. This doesn't mean that there are no temporal benefits to following Christ and it doesn't mean that God does not design to give us certain blessings now, but it does mean that those blessings may vary and that is in no way indicative of our secure reward. We long for and work for the day that we will see our glorious Savior face to face. On that day, He will tell those of us who have been faithful that we have done well, and He will usher us into a realm that contains more beauty, joy and blessing than anything we could ever imagine. It is only then that we will be able to fathom the immense wisdom in suffering for a moment in exchange for celebrating for all of our glorious eternity.

Folks, we endure difficulty now for the future and our hope is not impacted, nor does it waiver, when we face hard times. Instead, trials remind us of the fallenness of the world and they fix our attention on the beauty of a coming day when we no longer must face such hardship. It is in the future that we will realize the blessings of following Jesus and our momentary afflictions serve to prepare us for the eternal weight of glory of that moment in time.

October 13

Revelation 2:10-11

Sometimes, when we talk about heaven or eternal reward, our minds drift towards a truncated list of blessing. Certainly, I believe that there are going to be glorious heavenly dwellings for us and blissful reunions with loved ones and overwhelming scenes of beauty, including the unfathomable sight of our Savior. All of that is true and worth our consideration but I'd like to take you in a different direction today that I hope will further illuminate what we must live for in this difficult and fallen society.

When I was a young man, the most influential and meaningful person in my life was my grandfather. If you've been at Smyrna for any amount of time, you have heard me talk about him. He was an absolute hero to me and was the most important figure in my life from birth until he passed a few years ago.

Over the years, we shared many great memories but there are a few that stand out that I think might help illuminate the truth of our passage for the day. I remember a few moments in my childhood in which my grandfather uttered this short phrase, "I'm proud of you". We had thousands of discussions and hundreds of memories together, but those short words have been stuck in my brain for my entire lifetime.

The fact that someone I loved and respected so much would tell me how proud he was of me was the highlight of my childhood precisely because of his standing in my life. Nothing filled me with more joy, happiness, or a sense of accomplishment than to think that I could make my hero proud. I hope that all of you have had a similar experience. I'm sure that your mind went to someone in your life who was a giant to you. The prospect of their pride in you and the joy they took in seeing you succeed in the most important things is something that rarely goes away.

Today's text tells us that there is coming a day when our great God and Savior will look at His faithful children, give them the crown of life which communicates those very words, "Son or Daughter, I am proud of you." In Matthew 25, the Lord reminds us that God will look upon His own and tell them "Well done, good and faithful servant." Oh church, I want to be commended by the God that I love, and I pray you do as well!

To consider that moment, when you have been faithful unto death is almost overwhelming to me now! Won't it be wonderful to know that our Lord was proud of us? Won't it be an immense blessing to know that you have the approval of the Creator of the Universe? Won't it be overwhelmingly wonderful to consider that the One who made all things and is in control of all things is proud of little old you?

John's writing in Revelation is meant to spur the saints on to faithfulness in difficult times. He is reminding them of the hope, joy and blessing that awaits those who are faithful, and he tells us that there is coming a day that Jesus will affirm us, if we are faithful. I pray that you live for that affirmation! I pray that you consider how glorious it will be for the Lord to commend you in your Spirit enabled efforts to bring Him glory through a faithful lifestyle. Oh, I can't wait until the Lord gives me the crown of life.

October 14

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Let's pivot back to another glorious truth regarding the purpose of suffering and persecution. One truth that becomes clear to us as we suffer is the reality of our own inadequacy. Difficult moments show us that we are truly dependent upon the Providence and Power of Another. Nothing illuminates our own weakness, frailty, and inability more than moments of persecution or tribulation.

I think about how this may have worked out in Paul and Silas' life. As they are thrown into prison, the Bible says that they are found worshipping the Lord. This might sound like an odd response but when we consider the truths at play in their situation, their response makes total sense. Prison was the kind of place that these two could not escape on their own. They were there because of their witness to Christ, and they would remain until that same Christ opened the door for them. In that moment, they had nothing to do but worship as they declared their dependency upon the Lord, God intervened in a mighty way.

The story of the Philippian jailer is one of supernatural intervention which led to divine clarity. As the jailer saw the miracle of the earthquake and the result of its force, he concluded immediately that the God that Paul and Silas were worshipping had to be the initiator of what he had seen! He concluded (logically) that the only explanation for what had happened in that jail was supernatural intervention.

Simply stated, in the weakness of Paul and Silas, God's might showed forth. One reason for persecution and the resulting difficulty that we encounter is wrapped up in the reality that persecution and suffering provide a unique opportunity for God to do God things in our lives. He reminds us of our dependence upon Him in these moments. Its so easy for us to feel invincible and independent if we do not have reminders of our need. Its easy to give ourselves credit and to turn from Jesus without suffering.

Also, its easy for the world to attribute God's activity to unworthy people and/or forces without God's intervention in the difficult moments. When you suffer, God's power and might and faithfulness shines through to you and the surrounding society in an unparalleled way. Nothing helps others see the power and might of God and nothing reminds us of our need for Him like difficulty.

So, my prayer for you today is that you would not despise persecution but that you would see in those moments and seasons of difficulty evidence of God's grace. God is bringing you back to the place of dependence upon Him which is precisely where we need to be if we are going to rest in His grace, mercy, and providence alone. Persecution is not evidence of God's hatred; it is a sign that the Lord loves you and has great plans for your moment of peril... don't miss it!

October 15

James 1:2-4

There is a famous (or infamous) line that is often uttered in gyms and workout facilities across the country. The line is “no pain, no gain”. The implication is that if we are going to grow in our endurance, physical fitness, and strength, we must put our bodies through some rather uncomfortable experiences! Many of us have bemoaned the truth that pain leads to gain in the gym, but it is undeniably true, those who are willing to sacrifice and endure make progress and those who are unwilling stay the same or even regress.

Our walk with Christ functions in much the same way. There is no substitute for the testing that takes place in our walk. As James tells us here, we are to consider the difficult moments as “pure joy” but why? The answer is that in them we are seeing our faith proven and strengthened for the days ahead. What you endure today will be the foundation of a stronger tomorrow. The way that you see the Lord work in and through your situation will buttress you when the next storm arrives. The way Christ sustains and strengthens you in this moment of difficulty will give you even further reason to rejoice in knowing that your faith is real and that the One in whom you have believed is able to walk with you through the storm.

Think about this, how do you know that you believe? The answer is that you see and identify your faith in the difficult moments. Your maturity comes as you realize and experience more and more difficulties resulting in a life that is proven and mature, lacking in nothing.

I realized years ago that the people I most wanted to interact with had endured things before. When I ask for wisdom, I want to go to those who have navigated sticky situations. When I want to further understand an issue, I want to talk to those who have studied and experienced whatever it is that I’m attempting to know. When I want to be encouraged in the faith, I want to talk to the saint that has gone through some things. Why? Because in all those characteristics, people who have been tried and tested have something to offer that a novice does not.

Folks, what the Lord is bringing you through today will result in your joy tomorrow! That is true whether your tomorrow is on this planet or in the next world. He has a purpose for all things, and this is why we can rejoice when others mourn. We believe that God’s purposes extend far beyond the moment and far beyond what we can see. When Paul and Silas were jailed, the Apostle could pull from his previous experiences of persecution to find the courage and strength to get through another tumultuous moment and therefore the missionaries had joy in an odd place. Don’t despise the suffering, press in believing in the faithfulness and goodness of our God and King, He will never leave you nor forsake you.

October 16

1 Peter 4:12-14

Years ago, I had the opportunity to attend a UGA football game... in Auburn. Now, I know that some of you could care less about football and that's your right, but it is important to our devotion today for you to understand that folks in Alabama care about football... a lot. Being a middle school student and having very little understanding of what I was walking into, I was surprised when people continued to look at me with disdain and even say some not kind words towards me around town. What was it that caused them to be so mad with me? The answer is that I was wearing a shirt that represented the other team! I was the enemy and they wanted me to know that they had identified me as one!

When you represent something, or someone, that the larger society doesn't approve of, you can rest assured in knowing that they are going to let you know. This is true with something as trivial as football, but it is even more gloriously true as it relates to God in Christ. This is Peter's point in our text for today. He says that we are blessed if we are insulted for the name of Christ. Why is this a blessing? Because the world and the Lord has marked you as one of His!

Whenever you and I endure difficulty. Whenever the world would look upon us and hate us because of who we represent, we can rejoice in knowing that we are associated with Jesus. Their hatred of us is a testimony that we are who we think we are, and this is marvelous news. Essentially, we are being given evidence that the Lord is really our Lord and that we have every reason to hope for all the promises that He has promised His own.

I wonder if we have a category for such things today. I've heard many people prop up preachers and teachers who do a "better" job of engaging the culture because their messages don't offend. The thinking is that those who are best at representing Christ will not endure difficulty because the world will see their love and affirmation and glorify God without disdain. This might sound marvelous but is it biblical?

I believe that we have answered that question this week. Church family, if you represent Christ the world will hate you. Their response towards you does not mean that you are doing it wrong, in fact Peter would say that you are doing something right! Remember the words of the Lord on this topic and press on! Now, I must pause here for a moment and qualify what I just said. It is possible to be hated by the world because you're being a jerk! Sometimes people think they are being persecuted for righteousness when they are just being treated with the same anger they project. So, we must love those we encounter even as we share the hard truths, but we should know that our love will often not be reciprocated and that is just fine. In fact, the Bible predicts that the response is going to be unfavorable at times.

Be encouraged when folks despise you for the name of Christ and know that it is a blessing to be associated with Jesus. He is worth every difficult moment and every unkind word and the fact that we are suffering for Him is evidence that we really know Him.