

## Blessed Are The Persecuted

*“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness.” Matthew 5:11*

In anyone’s book, John the Baptist deserved better treatment than he received. He was a simple country preacher. The forerunner of the Christ. He was the cousin of the Messiah. He was the courageous voice of repentance. He lived in the lonely desert. Leathery face. Tanned skin. Clothing of animal skins. Everything he owned fit in a pouch.

John’s problems began when he called a king on the carpet. On a trip to Rome, King Herod succumbed to the enticements of his brother’s wife, Herodias. Deciding Herodias was better off marrying him, Herod divorced his wife and brought his sister-in-law home.

John the Baptist denounced the marriage. Herod might have let him get away with it, but not Herodias. She told Herod to have John thrown into the dungeon. One day Herodias had her daughter strut before the king and his generals at a party. Herod promised to do anything for the pretty young thing. She conferred with her mother, and responded, “I want the head of John the Baptist on a silver platter.”

The story is filled with inequity. John dies because Herod lusts. The good is murdered while the bad grin. A man of God is killed while a man of passion is winking at his niece. Max Lucado writes, “Is this how God rewards His anointed? Is this how He honors His faithful? Is this how God crowns His chosen? With a dark dungeon and a shiny blade?”

The inconsistency was more than John could take. Even before Herod reached his verdict, John was asking his questions. When he had a chance to get a message to Jesus, his inquiry was one of despair: *“When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, ‘Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?’”* Matthew 11:2

John is wrestling with the problem of unmet expectations—the fact that John was in deep trouble, and Jesus was conducting business as usual. Jesus’ silence was enough to create doubt in John’s belief. *“Are you the one? Or have I been following the wrong Lord?”*

Though the times have changed, and our circumstances have changed, the questions haven’t. They are asked anytime the faithful suffer the consequences of the faithless. Anytime a person takes a step in the right direction, only to have their feet knocked out from under them. Anytime a person does a good deed but suffers evil results. Anytime a person takes a stand, only to end up flat on his face . . . the questions come:

“If God is so good, why do I hurt so bad?”  
“If God is really there, why do I feel alone?”  
“Why do bad things happen to good people?”  
“Why are the righteous persecuted?”

We wonder sometimes, “Does God stand on the sidewalk with His hands in His pockets? Does God sometimes choose to do nothing? Does God sometimes opt for silence even when I’m screaming my loudest?”

Max Lucado tells the story of taking his family to the bicycle store to purchase a bike for his five-year-old, Jenna. She picked out a shiny “Starlett” with a banana seat and training wheels, and Andrea, age three, decided she wanted one as well. He explained to Andrea that she was too young. He told her she was still having trouble with a tricycle and was too small for a two-wheeler. No luck. She still wanted a bike. He explained to her that when she was a bit older, she would get a bike too. She just stared at him. He tried to tell her that a big bike would bring her more pain than pleasure, more scrapes than thrills. She turned her head and said nothing. Finally, he sighed and said, “This time daddy knows best.” Her response? She screamed it loud enough for everyone in the store to hear: “Then I want a new daddy!”

Disappointment demands a change in command. When we don't agree with the One who calls the shots, our reaction is often the same as Andrea's—the same as John's. "Is He the right one for this job?" Or, as John put it, "Are You the one? Should we look for another?"

In John's mind, it was time to exercise some justice and get some action. We watch what appears to be God sitting in silence while a missionary is kicked out of a foreign country or a Christian loses a promotion because of his beliefs, or a faithful wife is abused by an unbelieving husband. These are just three of many items that have made their way onto my prayer list—all prayers that seem to have gone unanswered.

Three times in this beatitude Jesus uses the word "*persecuted*," which means: "Harassed, opposed, or ill-treated."

### **1. The Reason For Persecution**

Persecution against Christians started with the sufferings of Christ Himself—rejected, scourged, crucified, a Man of Sorrows. Then the earliest disciples were arrested, whipped, and forbidden to preach in the name of Jesus, though they would not be silenced.

*"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me."* Matthew 5:11

Matthew 5:11–12 has a very different literary style from Matthew 5:3–10. Most people at least respect the other 7 qualities, even if they don't want them for themselves; but persecution always comes with lots of stigma.

Persecution is a given. Some of us have bought into the belief that once we have Jesus in our life, everything will go great. Maybe we've even thought that we should be successful, be financially well off and experience our best life now. Actually, the Bible says the exact opposite will happen for those who honor and obey Christ.

*"If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you."* John 15:20

*"...In this world you will have trouble..."* John 16:33

*"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake."* Matthew 24:9

*"Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."* 2 Timothy 3:12

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

*"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you."* 1 Peter 4:12

Jesus gives us two reasons why we will be persecuted.

- Because Of The Life We Live

*"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness."* Matthew 5:10

The word "righteousness" refers to living the "straight" way, of following Jesus. John Stott suggests that we should not be surprised if anti-Christian hostility increases, but rather be surprised if it does not.

## □ Because Of The Lord We Love

*“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”* Matthew 5:11

Persecution takes three forms. There is a change of tense from the third person to the second person. We move from “those” who are persecuted to the much more personal “you” are persecuted. The Almighty applauds from heaven when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Christ.

**Verbal Insults:** The word “*insult*” means “to revile, taunt, or defame.” This often takes the form of verbal abuse and insulting language. Matthew 27:39 tells us that people “*hurled insults at Jesus,*” and “*shaking their heads*” as they passed by the cross.

**Physical Attacks:** The word “*persecute*” means “to chase away or pursue with hostile intent, to be hunted down as an animal.”

**False Accusations:** “*falsely say all kinds of evil against you.*” David cried out in Psalm 35:11, “*Ruthless witnesses come forward; they question me on things I know nothing about.*” Slander is painful and infuriating. When people say things behind our backs, we must remember they did the same to Jesus.

Persecution is the trigger that causes God to pour out His blessings on your life.

*“Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.”* Hebrews 13:3

The apostles endured the worst persecution early on. They were beaten, and James was killed with a sword. Peter’s audience refused to participate in pagan worship. This alienated them from family and trade guilds, which were often essential for getting work, and Christian wives and slaves endured awful challenges for similar stands.

Each year, the Christian charity organization Open Doors International releases a “World Watch List” highlighting the fifty places where faith in Jesus costs the most. In 2022, Afghanistan, North Korea, Somalia, Libya, and Yemen topped the list. They estimate that 360 million Christians in the world today experience extreme persecution because of their faith. That is one out of every seven believers worldwide.

## **2. The Response To Persecution**

*“Rejoice and be exceedingly glad.”*

Jesus uses 2 continuous, present tense imperatives, so the idea really is, “*Be always rejoicing and always glad.*” Persecution is never pleasant. But when Christ calls us to suffer, we should have joy. The first time the apostles were beaten for preaching the gospel in Acts 5:41, their response was “*So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.*”

*“In God I have put my trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”* Psalms 56:11

These men had watched the Savior they loved die for their sins just months earlier. Now, as they nursed the wounds on their backs, they solemnly rejoiced that Christ counted them worthy to share in His suffering.

Persecution for righteousness’ sake began in the first family.

Cain killed Abel, “*his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous.*” 1 John 3:12

Joseph was persecuted by his brothers, and in Egypt he was cast into prison for righteousness’ sake. (Genesis 37, 39)

Moses was reviled again and again. (Exodus 5:21; 14:11; 16:2; 17:2; etc.).

Samuel was rejected. (1 Samuel 8:5)

Ahab and Jezebel hated Elijah and wanted him dead. (1 Kings 18:17; 19:2)

Jewish tradition says that Isaiah was put in a hollow log, which was then sawn in two.

The people of Jerusalem hated Jeremiah for predicting the fall of Jerusalem, and some of the leaders put him in a muddy cistern to die.

Nehemiah was oppressed and defamed. (Nehemiah 4)

Stephen was stoned. Peter and John were cast into prison. James was beheaded, and the entire course of the apostle Paul’s Christian life and ministry was one long series of bitter and relentless persecutions.

Hebrews 11:35–40 offers a masterful description of their sacrifice and God’s approval. The prophets didn’t enjoy the high life, but in God’s eyes, “*the world was not worthy of them.*” Hebrews 11:38

*“For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.”* Philippians 1:29

*“We ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.”* 2 Thessalonians 1:4

*“Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”* 1 Peter 4:12

*“All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”* 2 Timothy 3:12

*“But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you are blessed. And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled...For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.”* 1 Peter 3:14, 17

*“If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.”* 1 Peter 4:16

*“... for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

*“Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.”* Matthew 11:5

It was if Jesus was saying, “Tell John the Baptist that everything is going as planned.” The kingdom was being inaugurated. A unique kingdom. An invisible kingdom. A kingdom with three distinct traits.

- It Is A Kingdom Where The Rejected Are Received.

*“The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear...”* Matthew 11:5

No one were more shunned by their culture than the blind, the lame, the lepers, and the deaf. They had no place. No name. No value. They were the excess baggage on the side of the road; but those whom the people called trash, Jesus called treasures. Jesus told John that a new kingdom was coming—a kingdom where people have value not because of what they do, but because of whose they are.

- It Is A Kingdom Where The Dead Have Life.

The grave has no power. *“Report to John . . . the dead are raised.”* Jesus wasn’t oblivious to John’s imprisonment. He wasn’t blind to John’s captivity, but He was dealing with a greater dungeon than Herod’s. He was dealing with the dungeon of death.

□ It Is A Kingdom Where The Good News Is Preached To The Poor.

Christ’s kingdom is a kingdom for the poor. A kingdom where membership is granted, not purchased. You are placed into God’s kingdom. You are “adopted.” We are not admitted when we do enough, but when we admit we can’t do enough. You don’t earn it. You simply accept it. As a result, you serve, not out of arrogance or fear, but out of gratitude.

That’s the kingdom Jesus proclaimed: a kingdom of acceptance, eternal life, and forgiveness.

### 3. The Rewards Of Persecution

*“...because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”* Matthew 5:12

The final encouragement of Matthew 5:12 is that you are not alone. Most of the time when you are enduring persecution, it feels very lonely, and it feels like you are on the losing team.

The Apostle Paul, who endured plenty of persecution himself, provides helpful perspective, when he says, *“For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”* 2 Corinthians 4:17–18

We don’t typically think of the afflictions Paul endured as “light,” but when you have a clear vision of eternity as Paul did, you understand that they really aren’t that significant. The worst persecution imaginable, is “temporary.” Paul says that God has *“a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory”* awaiting the persecuted in heaven. You will never outgive God. His reward will be worth every cost.

Persecution produces the reward of an increasing harvest in God’s kingdom. Even in these last days, God’s kingdom will continue to advance. In the book of Revelation, Jesus dictated seven letters to seven churches in Asia Minor. One of those churches, Smyrna, was enduring extreme persecution at the time of John’s vision. Here is what the Savior had to say to such a church in such a moment:

*These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: “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. Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”* Revelation 2:8–10

*“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?”* Romans 8:31

*“My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness...Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”* 2 Corinthians 12:9–10