

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

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Scripture: Mt. 5:10-12

"Kingdom Living (part 3): Blessed are the Persecuted?"

THE GREAT TRIBULATION

You may have noticed a common theme in our three appointed Bible readings today. They all deal with persecution and two specifically warn that before Jesus returns there will be an intense period of persecution unlike no other. Our world, indeed, life itself is heading for a final cataclysmic climax. Though there have been the doomsayer's in every generation as well as those who think life is just going to go on and on, the Word of God is very clear. One day this present world of ours will end, and if it wasn't for Jesus Christ coming back, no one would survive.

Indeed, before Christ comes back, there will be a terrible time of war, famine, pestilence, persecution, and signs in the heavens. This period of time preceding Jesus' return, is often referred to as "the Great Tribulation." The Four Horsemen that the Apostle John sees and records in Revelation ch.6 give us a glimpse of that Tribulation period. And if you put your ear to the ground, you can hear the faint noise of the horses' hoof beats off in the distance.

I believe that we are fast approaching the Great Tribulation. We are in the twilight of human history. Whether it is in our generation or our children's or their children's, we do not know for sure, but in the total scheme of things, it is very close.

Now before this time of Great Tribulation, many believe that the Jewish Temple will need to be rebuilt. In fact, there are many in Israel today who are planning to rebuild such a temple. Not since 70 AD has there been a Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. The first temple built by King Solomon was destroyed by the Babylonian army in 586 BC. A second temple was later rebuilt, but it was desecrated and destroyed by the Roman armies in 70 AD. It was also desecrated by the ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, when he sacrificed a pig in the Holy of Holies and erected an altar in the Temple to the god, Zeus, in 167 BC. While such events are foreseen in Daniel's prophecy, Daniel refers to another time when this will happen again in the last days. This is the "*abomination of desolation*" that both Daniel and Jesus mention in this mornings readings from Dan. 12 and Mk. 13. Jesus warns that before He returns, the Jews, Jerusalem and the Jewish Temple will be under attack. Therefore, in order for this to be accomplished, three things are necessary: 1) there needs to be a state of Israel (happened by UN decree in 1948), 2) Jerusalem needs to be controlled by the Jews (happened in 1967 following the 6 Day War) and 3) a Temple needs to be rebuilt (this has not happened yet.)

Now one of the things that will take place during the Great Tribulation is a great persecution of believers. This shouldn't surprise us for the godly have been persecuted from the very beginning. Jesus said, "***If they persecuted me, they will persecute you.***" (Jn. 15:20). But Jesus said something else about those who are persecuted. Jesus also said, "***Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets which were before you.***" (Mt. 5:10-12).

BLESSED ARE THE PERSECUTED?

You know the last few weeks we have been studying together the Beatitudes, part of a series entitled "*Kingdom Living*." We talked about what it means when Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," and "Blessed are those who mourn," but I want to jump to the last beatitude today only because the theme of persecution is in all of our lessons. And let me add that again, this is something the world would never say.

The world would never say "Blessed are the persecuted." The world would say, "No way! There's no blessing in that!" The world would say "You're crazy!" And yet, Jesus affirms the blessing of persecution.

One of the marks of the last days will be the persecution of the saints and children of God. I mean when you think about it, who is the one person today that society can get away with ridiculing and mocking? The Bible-believing Christian – whether it is in Hollywood, on the university campus, or in the media. If you ridicule other groups, you'll get into trouble, but if you attack Bible-believing Christians, that's ok.

Now we shouldn't be surprised by such attacks, because the truth is there is no way to be a genuine Christian and escape persecution. **2 Tim. 3:12:** The apostle Paul said "***All who determine to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.***" St. Paul doesn't say "A few, or some, or many, he says, **"All who determine to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."**

And so we need to understand what Jesus is talking about when He warns us about persecution. We need to be prepared and we need to teach our children to be prepared because we live in a world that is becoming increasingly hostile to Bible-believing Christians. Now, you can rub shoulders with this world. You can compromise with this world. You can go along with this world and not receive any persecution. But if you are living for the Lord you will be persecuted.

And when we talk of persecution, it doesn't mean necessarily that you're going to be thrown into prison, or someone is going to come and beat you or torture you, or steal from you, or even kill you. Though that happens in other parts of the world and could one day happen one day here in America, we need to remember that persecution also takes the form of being the bud of jokes, of getting dirty looks, of being looked down upon as socially inappropriate or passed by on a promotion, or shunned and ostracized. The word we translate "persecution" literally means "to pursue" or "to come after." So it is anything that is an attack on our person, our reputation, our character or our family.

FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS' SAKE

Now for what will we be persecuted? Jesus tells us. He says we will be persecuted "***for righteousness' sake.***" The Greek word for righteousness comes from the word which means "to divide." When the Lord talks about righteousness He is talking about believing and doing what is right. Don't ever forget that we live in a world of right and wrong and good and evil. There are moral and spiritual absolutes. And yet, many people don't want to admit this. In fact, poll after poll shows that the majority of our citizens do not believe in absolute truth. That's why there is the old saying that if you want to get along with someone never mention politics or religion.

The truth is if you want to be the kind of person who never takes a stand about anything, who never witnesses for Jesus Christ, who never stands up for what is right, who never calls people on wrongdoing, you will never have to worry about persecution. I am reminded of what happened to me as a sophomore in high school. It was my first year on the cross country team and all rookies were told to expect to be initiated sometime midpoint in the season. Initiation took the form of being dragged and submerged in muddy pools of water in a forested area that made up our cross country course. When I found out about it, I told the captains that I thought the initiation antics were wrong and inappropriate. They laughed at me. Then one day, when one of the captains tried to "initiate" me, I wrestled with him until he backed off. During the struggle, he was even begging me to let him do it! Well, he walked away a frustrated young man. Later the older teammates began to call me "Billy Graham." When I told them that I took that as a compliment, they just shook their heads in frustration. I never had a problem afterwards. (By the way when I became captain of the cross-country team in my senior year such shenanigans ended.) While this is a very mild example of "persecution" it does illustrate what often happens when you stand up for what is right.

You see if we are going to seek first God's Kingdom and His righteousness, than we will need to take a stand. And that will lead to division at times. And it is all because as Christians we are called to be different.

We are called to stand up and to stand out. And when we do so, the world will take notice. I mean think about it for a moment, if the first eight of the beatitudes are true in your life, number eight (that of persecution) is guaranteed.

Jesus said, **"You are the salt of the earth and you are the light of the world."** Salt isn't just a preservative it is also an irritant. Salt is an irritant to the rot of sin in our world and light reveals the things of darkness. There are children of light, and children of darkness. We are alive in the Spirit, they are dead in their sins. We live by faith, they walk by sight. We understand them but they don't understand us. And therefore *they* say **"Remove that salt and put out that light!"** The world simply doesn't want to be reminded that there is a God and that we are accountable to God and that there is a right way and a wrong way.

Why will we be persecuted? **For righteousness' sake.** Now let me just add that we need to distinguish between persecution and punishment. We must be very careful that it's persecution and not punishment. Many times people confuse the two. We are punished by good people when we do evil. We are persecuted by evil people when we do good. There are many people who think they are being persecuted when they are simply receiving the punishment they should receive.

When Christians are filled with the spirit they will be naturally supernatural and they will be different, and they will be persecuted. But don't go around thinking you are being persecuted if you are not living for the Lord Jesus Christ. And persecution doesn't mean getting ridiculed because we are being overbearing or obnoxious. It is persecution for righteousness, not rudeness.

FOR THE LORD'S SAKE

Now we will not only be persecuted for righteousness' sake but we will also be persecuted **for the Lord's sake.** We will be persecuted because we love and follow the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no question that many people the world over have respect for Jesus and some of the things he taught. Everybody loves the babe in the manger, everybody loves the humble savior who dies for others, everyone loves the words that God so loved the world, but go beyond the sentimental moving aspects of Jesus' person, that's where the world's love ends.

The truth is the world hates Jesus Christ. Do you know why the world hates the Lord Jesus Christ? Jesus tells us in **Jn. 7:7: "The world hates Me because I testify against it that its works are evil."** What are the works of the world? Pride, greed, corruption, drunkenness, sexual immorality, pornography, racism, abortion, idolatry, false religion. That's the world! Jesus stands against such wickedness, but the world stands for it. That's why Jesus said, **"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, the world hates you...A servant slave is not greater than His Lord. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also."** (Jn. 15:19-20)

THE WORLD'S RESPONSE

Why does the world hate Jesus? Because Jesus is not of this world. When you receive Jesus you are no longer of this world and you will receive suffering as a result. And we all know how the world will respond. The world will come down on you like a hammer. The world will laugh at you, ridicule and revile you for Jesus Christ. You may receive personal insult, there may be physical abuse, and physical harm. More people have died for Jesus Christ in the last century than all other centuries combined. Communism was one of Satan's greatest weapons against the Church of Jesus Christ. And we still see this hatred of Christ and Christianity in our society today. Again, look at how Bible-believing Christians are portrayed in the media, in Hollywood, on the university campus? We are looked upon as bigots, hypocrites, or narrow-minded simpletons. In fact, someone has said that the Bible-believing Christian may be the most widely hated species on earth. Jesus warned that people will say all matter of evil against us His sake. And yet, Jesus also said, **"Rejoice and be exceedingly glad."**

OUR RESPONSE: WITH REJOICING AND WITH LOVE

You see that is one of the ways we are to respond. What's amazing is that when He speaks of persecution, Jesus also speaks of joy. He says, **"Rejoice and be glad."** The word used here literally means "to leap and jump, to dance." On the surface that doesn't seem to make any sense. Why would anybody be glad, not just glad but exceedingly glad, when being persecuted?

Why be joyful? I'll tell you why: People can finally see the difference! You are doing the right thing. Somehow they have identified you with the Lord. For His sake – it shows our devotion. For righteousness sake – it shows we are different. And it shows that we are found worthy to suffer for Jesus Christ.

Do you remember what happened to Peter and the Apostles in **Acts 5:40-42**? They were brought in by the authorities and whipped for preaching about Jesus. And after they were released we read **"they went on their way from the presence of the Council rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name."** And we are told that **"they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."**

And I'll tell you another reason we are to rejoice. It confirms that what Jesus said is true. And if what Jesus said is true then we can know that He will use our persecution for His glory, and that not only is our reward great in heaven, but others will be brought into the Kingdom as well. That's why the Apostle Paul wrote in **Phil. 3:10**: **"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings."**

But not only are we to respond with rejoicing, we are also to respond with love. The world needs love. Love is not giving people what they deserve; love is giving people what they need. The world doesn't see their need for a savior or for God, and the only way they're going to see their need is through our love. We are citizens of God's Kingdom. We are more than just citizens; we are the children of God. And that means learning how to act like God's sons and daughters, never stooping to the level of those who wish us harm. Never becoming like the ones who persecute us. We aren't to seek revenge or to get even.

What did Jesus say? **Mt. 5:44**: **"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you in order that you show yourselves to be sons of your Father in heaven."** And in **Lk. 6:27**: **"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."** We are to return good for evil. You say well that won't do any good for the other person. It may not, but it very may will. And you'll be better off because of it. Because you will be doing what God wants you to do. And you will be blessed because of it.

You see, we are not in this world to please other people, we're here to please Jesus Christ. I am reminded of the story of the concert violinist who performed a solo during a city's philharmonic orchestra concert. When the violinist finished playing the people stood to their feet to applause with great appreciation. But the violinist put his face in his hands and wept. His fellow musicians said, "Why are you weeping? Don't weep. Look at the people they loved it." But the violinist kept weeping. They said, "Look, they're all standing!" He said, "No, they're not all standing. Do you see that man down there? He's not standing." They said, "Well, He's only one man." The violinist said, "I know, but he's my teacher. And if he's not pleased, I'm not pleased."

You see it doesn't matter if you please the whole world, if you displease Jesus. But if you please the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, it doesn't matter whom you displease. We live in a world that needs Jesus Christ. And if we are to share the message, if we are to live for Christ, we will be persecuted. But more even more important God will be glorified and our reward will be great in heaven, for we were considered worthy to suffer for our Lord. **"Blessed are those who are persecuted, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven."** In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!