

Exalting Jesus Christ

"The Promise of Persecution"

INTRODUCTION:

- I. Anyone familiar with the Bible – especially the New Testament – knows that persecution was a constant threat to first century Christians.
 - A. Take a look at the life of the apostle Paul as just one example.
 1. While Saul of Tarsus sat in Damascus, temporarily blinded from his encounter with Jesus, the Lord told Ananias to explain to Saul why he had been chosen, and what to expect as a result.
 - a. **Acts 9:15-16** – *But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake."*
 2. Years later, Paul would write about the things he and others had endured for the sake of Jesus Christ.
 - a. **1 Corinthians 4:11-13** – *To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. 12 And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; 13*

being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now.

- b. **2 Corinthians 4:8-10** – *We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed — 10 always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.*

- c. **2 Corinthians 11:25-28** – *Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; 26 in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; 27 in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness — 28 besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.*

- B. The faithful among God's people have always suffered persecution.
 - 1. Looking back to those who lived before the cross of Christ, the Hebrew writer vividly recounts the horrors they experienced.

a. **Hebrews 11:32-38** – *And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: 33 who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. 35 Women received their dead raised to life again.*

Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. 36 Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented — 38 of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.

2. And as he looked forward in time, the apostle Paul warned of things yet to come.

a. **2 Timothy 3:1-5** – *But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: 2 For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers*

of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, 3 unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, 4 traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, 5 having a form of godliness but denying its power.

3. In fact, Paul tells us persecution goes hand-in-hand with all the blessings and promises of God.
 - a. **2 Timothy 3:12** – *Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.*

- II. In our studies of the gospel of John, "Exalting Jesus Christ," we want to turn to the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters and focus our attention of what Jesus said here about "The Promise of Persecution."
 - A. As Jesus met with His disciples in that upper room, He not only tried to prepare them for the reality of His own impending death, but also prepare them for the persecutions they would soon be experiencing.
 1. Therefore, I want us to take some time this morning to seriously consider what the Lord said to His disciples on this occasion.
 2. It's here that the Lord has a lot to say on the subject of persecution.

BODY:

- I. In the verses we want to look at now we find that Jesus answers four questions concerning persecution – four questions that would help His disciples face this unimaginable challenge.
 - A. The first question Jesus addresses is: "Where will persecutions come from?"
 1. I want you to notice the stark contrast between verses 17 and 18.
 - a. Jesus had just said: **John 15:17** – *"These things I command you, that you love one another."*
 - b. But no sooner had Jesus talked about love, He changes the subject to hate: **John 15:18** – *"If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you."*
 2. The fact that the world will hate us for following Jesus is all the more reason why we must love one another in the same way Jesus loved us.
 - a. In the end we will only have one another.
 3. The word "*world*" Jesus used here is the Greek word "kosmos" – which according to Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon refers to "the ungodly multitude; the whole mass of men alienated from God, and therefore hostile to the cause of Christ."

- a. The disciples of Jesus Christ will not be hated by the whole populated world, but rather by those who deliberately choose to live in sin.
 - b. We're talking about those who want nothing to do with the message of the gospel - those who are alienated from God, and hostile to the cause of Christ.
 - c. We're talking about a world-system where ravenous wolves come clothed in the sheepskin of religion, politics, and philosophy.
 - d. We're talking about those whose hearts are set on the evils of this world, and who are enticed by those evils.
4. This is why John later wrote this stern warning to Christians:
- a. **1 John 2:15-17** – *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life — is not of the Father but is of the world. 17 And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.*
5. Therefore, Jesus warned His disciples:
- a. **John 15:18-19** – *"If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. 19 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."

6. A few verses later, Jesus is even more specific as to who would be the first to persecute His disciples.
 - a. **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.*
 7. Sadly, Jesus pointed to those who drape themselves in religiosity as being the first to bring persecution against the Lord's faithful.
 - a. Persecution by those who are given to *"the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life"* will first come from where we least expect it – from within.
- B. The second question Jesus addresses is: "What can we expect from this persecution?"
1. Obviously, the first thing we can expect is for the world to show us hate.
 - a. Again, Jesus reminds us: **John 15:19** – *"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."*
 - b. This emotion wears a wide range of faces: from indifference to indignation, from avoidance to animosity.

- c. These are the faces that glare at you from your family, former friends, business associates, classmates, neighbors – and even from so-called "religions" people.
 - d. Sometimes these faces are those of our own brothers and sisters in Christ who may think our faithfulness fringes on fanaticism.
2. But Jesus also made it clear that, in addition to hatred which comes in many faces, we can also expect relentless persecution of every kind.
- a. **John 15:20** – *"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."*
 - b. The Greek term translated "persecution" means "to put to flight, to pursue."
 - c. New Testament scholar A.T. Robertson says the word means "to chase like a wild beast" – in other words, to be relentlessly hunted and stalked.
 - d. And just in case you think we don't have to deal with persecution today, I would suggest you try taking the gospel into regions of the world that are under the control of Communism or Islam.

- (1). I know Christians in China who have to assemble with other Christians in very small groups to avoid appearing anti-government – knowing all the time that the Chinese government is listening to all their phone conversations and reading all their email.
- (2). And I know of preachers in the southern Philippines who have to be careful when and where they travel to avoid confrontations with militant Islamists who are intent on eradicating Christianity anywhere they find it.
- (3). The words of Jesus in **John 16:2** are as real today to Christians in China and in the Philippines as they were to the disciples of Christ 2,000 years ago: ". . .*the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service.*"
- (4). This is especially true of radical Islamists.
 - e. And don't think for a moment that these things couldn't happen here as well.
 - f. The Lord's church has a long history as an underground church.

C. Jesus not only tells us what will occur, but also answers the question:

"Why will these things happen?"

1. The Lord gives us three reasons why persecutions occur.

- a. The first is simply "*because you are not of the world*" (**John 15:19**).
- (1). The world wants conformity; it wants everyone to fit into the same mold – which is why the apostle Paul warned: **Romans 12:2** – *And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. . .*
 - (2). And if we don't conform, we become "the odd man out" – the outcast whom everyone thinks is strange, just as Peter warned: **1 Peter 4:4** – *In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you.*
- b. Jesus explained the second reason why persecutions occur with the words, ". . .*because they do not know the One who sent Me.*" (**John 15:21**).
- (1). Let's face it. The world is a seething cauldron of unbelief – not just an ignorance of God, but also a willful refusal to even acknowledge that there is a God.
 - (2). Therefore, when we try to live an exemplary life – trying to imitate the character of Jesus Christ – we are, in essence, rebuking everyone else who chooses to live an ungodly life.

- (3). Consequently, just living a godly life and standing for godly principles stirs up a hornet's nest of emotions in others.
 - (4). If you don't believe me, try openly expressing your disapproval of the gay and lesbian lifestyle, and your opposition to gay marriages. See how many "friends" begin to distance themselves from you.
 - (5). Why do they do this? Because they know nothing of the holiness and righteousness of God.
- c. And finally, Jesus explains the third reason why persecutions occur with the words: ". . . *that the word may be fulfilled.*"
- (John 15:25).**
- (1). The very existence of Christians in the world produces guilt for many people.
 - (2). Have you ever had someone tell an off-color joke, and then become embarrassed and apologize because they realize you overheard it?
 - (3). By our very existence as a Christian we're telling the world that there are things we won't do, or say, or think because we know those things are wrong and sinful.
 - (4). That's why, in verses 22 through 24, Jesus essentially said, "If I hadn't come, the world wouldn't even be aware

of its sin. But because I'm here, they're painfully aware, and that's why they hate Me – without a cause."

(5). Jesus fulfilled the Word by coming into this world as the Lamb of God who would take away our sins.

2. Perhaps an appropriate question to ask at this point is, "Why don't we face more persecution today?"

a. Have you ever wondered about that?

b. Remember, Paul said: **2 Timothy 3:12** – . . . *all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.*

c. Maybe that's the problem. Maybe we don't experience more persecution in our lives because we blend in too well with the world around us.

d. I learned a bit of trivia the other day that helps to illustrate this point.

(1). Jonas Hanway was the first to introduce the umbrella into British society.

(2). Umbrellas had been used for centuries in the Orient, but never in Europe.

(3). Since no one had ever seen an umbrella before, Hanway not only became a curiosity, some mocked him while a few actually pelted him with stones and dirt.

(4). Of course, today the umbrella is a common sight in England – it is universally accepted in all social and professional circles.

(5). And so, we think nothing of seeing someone carry an umbrella today.

e. Maybe we've gone the way of the umbrella and lost our uniqueness as Christians.

f. Since Paul's statement to Timothy is true – that *"all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution"* – then maybe the problem is simply that our lives don't stand out enough to attract anyone's attention – let alone anybody's persecution.

g. Just a thought.

D. Finally, Jesus answered the question, "How should we react when persecution comes?"

1. Jesus actually gives four suggestions on how we should react – two negative, and two positive.

a. First, we should act positively by relying on the Holy Spirit.

(1). Almost abruptly, Jesus again speaks of the Holy Spirit in the context of persecution: **John 15:26** – *"But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father,*

the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me."

- (2). The only reason why I think Jesus reminded His disciples about the Holy Spirit at this point is simply because He is "*the Helper*" – the *parakletos* – the "one called alongside" to strengthen and support them.
- (3). The Holy Spirit does the same for us today – especially when we turn to the Spirit-given Word in the face of persecution, and learn to trust in the promises of God found there.

b. Secondly, we should react positively to persecution by standing fast, and boldly testifying of our faith in Jesus Christ.

- (1). Jesus said: **John 15:27** – "*And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning.*"
- (2). When persecution came in the lives of the apostles, they stood firm in their faith in Christ – because they knew beyond any doubt Who and What Jesus is, and had no problems affirming their faith even if it meant their lives.
- (3). The same is true for us today as well. If we have a rock-solid faith in Jesus Christ, we too will be able to stand on that unshakable faith in times of persecution.

- (4). Not only that, but we will also have the courage to continue testifying to the world that Jesus truly is the Christ, the Son of the living God.
- c. On the negative side, there are some things we shouldn't do – starting with the fact that we should never stumble.
- (1). **John 16:1** – *"These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble."*
 - (2). The Greek word for "stumble" is the same word from which we get the English word "scandal."
 - (3). When we stumble in our walk as a Christian, we slip and sometimes fall – which is the very thing the Lord is trying to prevent.
 - (4). We never want to give anyone an opportunity to scandalize our walk with Christ by telling everyone how we slipped and fell into sin in some unguarded moment.
- d. And a fourth way to react to persecution, which is also something we should not do, is that we should never forget who we are, and never forget the things Jesus promises to those who remain faithful.
- (1). Therefore, Jesus told His disciples: **John 16:4** – *"But these things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them. And these*

things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you."

- (2). As long as Jesus was by their side, these disciples could immediately turn to Him for advice and consolation in times of persecution.
- (3). But what do they do now that the Lord is leaving? He told them to remember the things He said – everything He said – especially the things said about persecutions.
- (4). And, of course, the same is true for us. We don't have the Lord literally walking by our side every day. But we do have access to everything He said – and all that is found in the pages of the New Testament.

CONCLUSION:

- I. Have you faced persecution recently?
 - A. I'm not talking about simply finding yourself as the target of someone's anger – I'm talking about being persecuted for *"righteousness sake."*
 1. If you have been persecuted for the Lord's sake, then perhaps you will find encouragement in this lesson to continue fighting the good fight of faith.
 2. But, on the other hand, if you have not been persecuted for *"righteousness sake,"* then I can think of two possible reasons.

- a. One, you're not a Christian.
 - b. Or two, you're a Christian who has blended in so perfectly with the world around you that no one knows.
- B. Being a faithful Christian, and taking a stand for Jesus Christ, and for the truth of the Word of God will eventually put you in the cross-hairs.
1. Eventually, you will become a target of persecution – from one source or another, and for one reason or another – you will become a target.
 2. But the blessings that await every faithful Christian makes any and all forms of persecution worth it.
 - a. Jesus said: **Matthew 5:12** – *"Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*
- C. If you want to experience that great *"reward in heaven"* then I urge you to do one of two things:
1. If you're not a Christian, come to Jesus Christ in faith, repenting of all your past sins, confess your faith in Him, and then be buried with Him in baptism so that your sins can be washed away.
 2. If you are a Christian, but have learned to blend in with the world to escape notice, repent of that and begin today to take a bold and courageous stand – telling everyone of your faith in Christ, and start living in such a way to bring Him honor and glory.