

Persecution 9-12-04

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Matthew 10:17-28 (NIV)

¹⁷ "Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. ¹⁸ On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. ¹⁹ But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, ²⁰ for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. ²¹ "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. ²² All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. ²³ When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes. ²⁴ "A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. ²⁵ It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household! ²⁶ "So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. ²⁷ What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. ²⁸ Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

As Jesus sent His disciples throughout Galilee, He gave them the warnings in our passage for today. They would not meet with such intense persecution until after Pentecost, but He was preparing them for that time when they would not be tolerated. To speak out for Christ is a great privilege, but it comes with a great cost.

It wasn't long after Peter's first message in Jerusalem that he and John were taken by the local council and flogged, as Jesus had predicted in verse 17. (Acts 5:40) Stephen was the first martyr, killed because of the Jews' jealousy over the growth of Christianity in Jerusalem and conviction from the Spirit's account of their history. (Acts 7:57-58) In 44 A.D., James was the first Apostle to be martyred by Herod Agrippa. (Acts 12:1-2) The church was beginning to see Jesus' prophetic words come to pass. As the servants of God speak the truth to a dying world, the Destroyer will always seek out willing instruments to persecute them. *Fox's Book of Martyrs* tells the history of this persecution throughout time. It has not abated in the least. In fact, there are more people killed because they believe in Jesus today than at anytime in history.

We are so insulated from it that we rarely think of real suffering for Christ. To us, persecution is someone telling us we are idiots or intolerant. But to most of the world, declaring the truth of the love of Jesus can mean your house will be burned, or your body beaten, or even death. In Pakistan today, an ally with the US in the war on terror, to share your Christian faith is punishable by hanging. As the Pakistani Christians sing songs of praise, one hand is lifted to the Lord and the other held to their throat as symbol that they are ready to hang for the sake of sharing the Gospel with a lost world.

Commented [notes1]: 40 His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.
Acts 5:40 (NIV)

Commented [notes2]: 57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.
Acts 7:57-58 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: 1 It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.
2 He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.
Acts 12:1-2 (NIV)

In fact, with the exception of Jews, I don't believe any other religion in history has been as harassed and hounded like the Christian faith. It makes sense, for we turn the other cheek. (Matthew 5:40) When hated, we respond with love. (Matthew 5:44) Since the enemy of Christ seeks to kill, steal, and destroy, it only makes sense that the Children of God would be his target. (John 10:10) In the Sudan right now, tens of thousands of Christians have been killed and more than a million are homeless. The UN could barely scrape enough votes together to tell the Sudanese government that if they did not act to stop the violence in thirty days, there may be sanctions. What resolute wording! The time is up, and nothing has been done by Sudan or the UN. These people are killed or homeless because they believe in Jesus Christ.

Let me tell you a recent story from Voice of the Martyrs. These things are happening today, just as Jesus predicted 2000 years ago. "Elder George left the comforts of his established congregation to begin a new outreach in the predominantly Muslim village of Manawala, not far from Lahore, Pakistan. He ministered to many families in the area, and church members say he was an exemplary Christian who never quarreled with anyone, including Muslims. In fact, Muslims would often come to Elder George when they needed prayer for healing. Some became members of the church congregation after they were healed.

Just before mid-day on April 2, 2004, Elder George's family had just finished watching the *JESUS* film. George's wife Aniata says two armed men stormed into the house, and one of the attackers gagged her mouth.

'He told me I would also be killed if I cried out for help,' explained Aniata. The other assailant aimed his shotgun at Elder George's right cheek and pulled the trigger. The two assassins wanted to make sure Elder George was dead. They took turns bludgeoning his head with the wooden handle of their gun.

Aniata says the assassins were hired by her Muslim neighbor – a local attorney. She says he had threatened to kill her husband and had continually urged their landlord to evict the family. He was irritated that Muslims were regularly attending prayer meetings and healing services at the Christian house.

Voice of the Martyrs has made it possible for Aniata and her 10-year-old son to get counseling after being traumatized by that horrific experience. The son, Tariq, told the VoM staff that he was encouraged by his father's example. 'My father prayed at the same time every morning. He would wake us up each day at 5:00 a.m. for morning prayers,' he said. 'I want to study hard so I can become a pastor like my father and serve the Lord.'" – from Voice of the Martyrs Pakistan Field Report, September 2004

How do you explain these atrocities? Christians do good, help others, tell them about a God that loves them, and the response is to murder them. There is no other explanation than evil opposing the advancement of the Kingdom of God. When we decide we will stand up for truth and offer the light and love of Jesus to those whom we come in contact with, we can expect to be persecuted. Paul tells us that if we live a godly life in Christ we will be persecuted. (2Timothy 3:12)

Commented [notes4]: 39 But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. Matt 5:39 (NIV)

Commented [notes5]: 44 But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; Matt 5:43-44 (KJV)

Commented [notes6]: 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. John 10:10 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: 12 In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, 2 Tim 3:12 (NIV)

The Life Application Bible lays out this passage in a very systematic way that might help us remember the truth that Jesus taught. First, Jesus tells us who may oppose us. He shows the possible pressures. Then He warns us of what our natural reaction would be, and finally the truth we need to face that threat.

Verse 17 gives us our first opposition. *"Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues."* This tells us the religious community will oppose us. (Acts 7:51) The religious always oppose those in relationship with God because their sense of security in ritual is challenged. As the disciples took the truth to the world, people saw a difference between doing religious works and knowing Jesus as Lord. The pressure they will apply is fear of public ridicule. ²² *All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.* Our natural response would be fear and worry. I was at a mainline denomination camp one Summer, and I was excited to share with the campers. The speaker was on fire for the Lord. The leader of the camp took us aside and told us that if we didn't tone down this "Jesus only" teaching we would never speak there again. Neither of us has spoken there since, but those kids heard the truth. We believed in verse 32. *"Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven."* We didn't want the acknowledgment of men; we wanted to please God and do what is right. (Galatians 1:10)

The next threat mentioned comes from government. ¹⁸ *On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.* Verse 26 and 28 tell us we'll be threatened and possibly physically harmed or even put to death. Our natural response is fear and worry. What truth do we need to know? ¹⁹ *But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say,* ²⁰ *for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.* God is using you to speak to leaders. The Holy Spirit will empower your words.

If our life is threatened, we are not to fear man but God. Man can only destroy the body. God's judgment sends soul and body to hell. Which should we be most concerned about, man or God? Seems like a no brainer to me! (Isaiah 51:7)

Next, Jesus warned about opposition from family. ²¹ *Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death.* The threat is rejection from our family. After the Sam Rotman concert, we learned the sad story of how his Jewish family completely rejected him upon hearing of his conversion. A number of the students in India told me how they had been thrown out of their home when their family found they were attending a church and reading the Bible. They could come back to their family only if they renounced Christianity and worship the Hindu gods. It is a high price to follow Jesus. It is a higher price not to! Anyone's natural reaction would be fear and worry. I can't imagine walking away from my family. I thank the Lord that all my family is in the Kingdom. But rejection by our family is a price that many Christians have had to pay. Once we have seen the truth, putting our family first would mean we loved ourselves more than them. True love of family will speak the truth in love out of concern for their eternal souls.

Commented [notes8]: 51 "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Acts 7:51 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: 10 Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ. Gal 1:10 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: 7 "Hear me, you who know what is right, you people who have my law in your hearts: Do not fear the reproach of men or be terrified by their insults. Isaiah 51:7 (NIV)

The truth we need to cling to is in verse 31. We are of much greater value to God than the sparrows. We have a heavenly Father and a heavenly family. The Psalmist wrote, "When my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me." (Psalm 27:10)

The enemy comes at us to create fear and worry because we are bringing the liberating truth to his captives. Fear is his weapon to try and get us to back off and leave his captives enslaved. (2 Timothy 1:7) That is why Jesus says, "Fear not, for I am with you! (Joshua 1:9) You are of great value to the Father. Do not fear those who are able to kill the body! Go liberate them with the truth. (John 8:32) Any sacrifice you make is more than worth it!" (Mark 10:29-30) The most common sacrifice we must make is to give up our rights and demands and be loving, forgiving and understanding, that they might come to Jesus.

Imagine looking back from eternity and thinking about an opportunity you had to stand up for Jesus and bring the light of truth into the life of someone in darkness. That little blip of time on earth that is our life will seem like it lasted for a second or two compared to eternity. Looking back on that opportunity and all opportunities we had been given by God, we will either be filled with joy that we were willing to be rejected and belittled for the name of Jesus, or we will be grieved that we were ashamed after all that our loving Father has done for us. And for each soul that came out of the darkness and into the light, we'll be overjoyed. (1 Peter 2:9)

²⁶ "So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. ²⁷ What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. ²⁸ Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

In verses 26, 28 and 31 Jesus tells not to fear our opposition. Why are Christians afraid to move to Sedona? I'm glad Jesus set me in the midst of the battle. It is the frontline soldiers that can do the most good. This is a city that is daily inundated with seekers. What an opportunity! You could be in a Bible belt city where everyone you talked to knew and understood the Gospel, but frankly, that doesn't sound very exciting to me. I'll take the heat by the grace of God.

In the last few weeks, the spiritual opposition raised to a new level. I hope you aren't playing Church because as the battle intensifies, those who want just do their own thing will stumble and fall. (Isaiah 40:29-31) In our Tuesday evening Bible study, we have been learning from Dr. Francis Schaffer that the mantra of our day is personal peace and affluence. You might say, "That sounds nice," but let me unmask those terms, selfishness and love of money. What will make **ME** happy? How much pleasure can **I** find in things? It is a deceptive lie that will drive you until you don't have time to pray and read your Bible resulting in spiritual starvation. It keeps your eyes so focused on the here and now that you have no time to fix your eyes on Jesus. (Hebrews 12:1; 2 Corinthians 4:17-18)

The church at large is so permeated with a compromise between the world and Jesus, that we have little influence for good in society, in other Christians' lives, and even in our own homes. There is no fear of God in our lives. (Romans 3:18) We have

Commented [notes11]: 10 Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me. Psalms 27:10 (NIV)

Commented [notes12]: 7 For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. 2 Tim 1:6-7 (KJV)

Commented [notes13]: 9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."

Josh 1:9 (NIV)

Commented [notes14]: 32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." John 8:32 (NIV)

Commented [notes15]: 29 "I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel 30 will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields--and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. Mark 10:29-30 (NIV)

Commented [notes16]: 29 "I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel 30 will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields--and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. Mark 10:29-30 (NIV)

Commented [notes17]: 29 He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. 30 Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; 31 but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. Isaiah 40:29-31 (NIV)

Commented [notes18]: 1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Heb 12:1 (NIV)

Commented [notes19]: 17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 2 Cor 4:17-18 (NIV)

Commented [notes20]: 18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes." Romans 3:18 (NIV)

convinced ourselves that the love of God will outweigh the holiness of God. Holiness demands justice. Holiness demands that we live a new life in Christ Jesus. Holiness demands that the precious investment of the life of Christ in us be allowed to be expressed free of worldly values and with a passion for things of God. (Proverbs 14:27) Are you so busy you don't have time to let God speak to you through His word? (Psalm 46:10) Then you need to repent and reprioritize your life. Are you so wrapped up in worldly things that you don't take time to commune with God in prayer, pleading for the lost, for God to send laborers, for your church, your family and friends? Then you need to repent and return to your first love.

Sometimes I wonder if I am preaching clearly enough the need to turn from the world and experience Jesus as Lord of our life. How can we get to the point where we would not fear persecution if we aren't even willing to put Jesus first in our daily priorities? We have a need for godly fear! We can be so sure we have our ticket to heaven, and yet our lives not indicate that we are born again. You must be born again! (John 3:7) Those are Jesus' words to a man that thought he was very religious. Are you willing to put Jesus first? Are you willing to let His life be manifest in you? (2Corinthians 4:11) Are you willing to be very different from the world around you? Eternity is a very, very, very, very long time. That should be a big motivation. But greater still, the love of God should motivate us to let Jesus really live in us. (2Corinthians 5:14)

I have no doubt that Elder George was putting Jesus first when he went to plant a church in that Muslim community. His daily life verified the fact that He was a born again servant of Jesus. He did not fear those who killed the body, but were not able to kill the soul. While Latimer was preaching in England, he noticed the King was in attendance. As he preached, he knew he was coming to the part of the sermon for which he could be burned at the stake. He said out loud, "Latimer! Latimer! Latimer! be careful what you say, for Henry the king is here." After a long pause he said, "Latimer! Latimer! Latimer! be careful what you say for the King of kings is here." He was burned at the stake, but he went to a better resurrection. (Hebrews 11:35) He put God over his personal peace. He lived for treasures in heaven, not for affluence on earth. (Matthew 6:19-20) I wondered if this message is too bold, too challenging. I could water this message down and know that through the week I would hear no complaints. "Paul! Paul! Paul! be careful what you say, there may be some who are offended. Paul! Paul! Paul! be careful what you say, you may offend your holy God."

Where are the men who will deny themselves and take up their cross? Faith without works is dead. If we are born again, our lives will show a difference. If we stand for the truth, we will be persecuted for it. We will suffer loss in this world, but reward will await us in the next, and God will be glorified. Rise up O men of God. Be done with lesser things. Give heart and soul and mind and strength to serve the King of kings! Where are the men who will so identify themselves with Jesus Christ that they are willing to speak out and be ridiculed? Who will, by grace, fear God and not fear man?

Commented [notes21]: 27 The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, to depart from the snares of death. Prov 14:27 (KJV)

Commented [notes22]: 10 "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." Psalms 46:10 (NIV)

Commented [notes23]: 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' John 3:7 (NIV)

Commented [notes24]: 11 For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. 2 Cor 4:11 (NIV)

Commented [notes25]: 14 For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. 2 Cor 5:14 (NIV)

Commented [notes26]: 35 Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Heb 11:35 (NIV)

Commented [notes27]: 19 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. Matt 6:19-20 (NIV)