

**Reading:** Acts 5:27-42

**Theme:** Persecuted for Christ's sake.

The Christian life is an exciting life and contains many surprises – many pleasant, some unpleasant! Remember, if you can, when you were newly converted and knew what it was like to have peace with God. The wonder of having your sins forgiven for ever and the peace and the joy that gave. You realised you were a new creation in Christ and your desires, thoughts and aspirations were being changed. You came to realise that deceit, lying, being two-faced were more and more reducing your life and you wanted to be honest, trustworthy in everything you said or did. You became careful not to deceive or to cheat anybody, maybe your disposition and attitude to life changed and you lost your angular, grumpy short tempered nature and you became a joy to know. The early experience of being a Christian is amazing and we can imagine that everyone would appreciate the change in us, be happy for us, but then BANG we met with opposition, laughing, mocking, snide remarks - not only by enemies, but by family, loved ones, neighbours and friends. Pressures may have been brought upon us to relax, enjoy ourselves forget this newfound religious thing and don't be too serious about it as it will pass and we were not to get too involved etc.

What a surprising reaction to those who show the characteristics of a Christian as described in the early part Matthew 5 in the Beatitudes. Surely the world would welcome such people with open arms? Surely the world needs such pure, merciful, peacemaking people? Incredibly the world at large assumes it would want and welcome such ones, **UNTIL** the 1<sup>st</sup> time it comes across the genuine article! People assume they are well disposed to God and Jesus, until they meet someone who is truly Christ-like and their apathy, their intolerance, their hatred of God and the Lord Jesus comes out.

What about us here? What about you, have you really understood what the gospel is about? The gospel tells us that unless we are born-again by God's Spirit we are utterly condemned and without any hope before God! Is this how we have ever seen ourselves? Perhaps someone here thinks that they are fine and may enjoy church, even if we do speak of sinners needing to be saved, but you feel that that obviously does not mean you and if it did you would be so insulted that... well you'd do something! If you feel like that, then you are one of those we pray for and long that you will be brought to admit your sin and go to the Lord Jesus as your Saviour so that you will be saved - especially from the sin of self contented pride.

This last beatitude in Matthew 5:10 is enlarged upon and amplified in v11-12. This is a further searching characteristic of true Christians - rejoicing in persecution and suffering and counting such as a blessing! Are we prepared for this as Christians? Yes we may want to show, to a greater or lesser extent, the previous 7 characteristics, but what about this one? It's not a pick and mix set of Beatitudes, but all are to be present to an extent in the life of every Christian. Do we want to be blessed as Christians? Are we prepared for this part of the blessing and to be able to rejoice in it? The 1<sup>st</sup> 7 Beatitudes are active and come from within us, but with this 8<sup>th</sup> beatitude we are passive recipients of outside actions. I want us to see 2 things:

### **1. The Reason for Persecution.**

Verse 10 is in sharp contrast to "*Blessed are the peacemakers*". Persecution follows on, arises from the very fact that they are to be peacemakers - those who are called on to make peace with God and make peace one with others.

We are to note we are not told that we are blessed if we suffer or are persecuted. It is **only** if we do so **for righteousness' sake, for Jesus' sake**. We do not receive this type of blessing if we are Christians yet antagonise friends, neighbours because we have angular characters, or have an awkward disposition, or are interfering busybodies or even unwise in what we do or even how we witness. In such cases we may get what we deserve, but it is not being persecuted for righteousness' sake or for Jesus' sake. This does not cover any and every suffering we have because we are pushing this, that, the other cause, or suffering because of our political beliefs or social activities. The persecution and sufferings spoken of here are linked to righteousness and for Jesus' sake and for His gospel. We are not blessed if we suffer because we break the law of the land in any way e.g. failure to pay TV licence, car tax, council tax or break the speed limit etc.

This means we have to think seriously about what is this righteousness that we are to rejoice in being persecuted for? If the previous Beatitudes are true of us, then they will inevitably have to show in our lives - in our behaviour, words and thoughts. We will find that we desire to become more like the Lord Jesus and should be doing so day by day. Sadly the world hated and rejected Him c.f. John 15:18-20 *"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than His master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also."*

Because we are Christians and ruled by Jesus, the world, which is run by sin and Satan, will hate us because it hates our Saviour

and it takes it out on us! If we imitate Christ the world will applaud us, if we are Christ-like it will hate us! If we are do-gooders, working for a noble cause, it is unlikely we would be persecuted, but we would probably be honoured and praised. The world would look and see that we are really like them if they stretch themselves to their best and they would honour us because of that.

Yet when they are confronted by those living a truly righteous, Christ-like life, they see ones who are radically different from themselves. They see people who show the newness of life in them, who live to please God and not self. It is not so much what they do or don't do, say or don't say, but what God has done in the person when He saved them and gave them new life. The Lord Jesus was persecuted by the Pharisees. They prided themselves in righteous and they worked hard at it. Yet when they came face-to-face with Jesus, they encountered incarnate holiness, absolute holiness, righteousness and truth. What then happened? Their righteousness was shown to be nothing but dirt and pride and they hated Him.

In a lesser sense the same happens with us as we become more and more Christ-like; as our lives show up people's lives and their need of God's righteousness. If we live a Christ-like life, then we can expect aggro from friends, relatives, partners, neighbours. Even those who are very religious among them can cause us much suffering and heartache through words, slander, lies and even open hostility. Often a natural person on seeing Christ in us cannot admire Him, like Him, but may feel condemned and so dislike, hate Him and us. Popularity with the world and Christ likeness rarely go together as good partners. If we are righteous, holy and godly then sadly we can expect to

suffer persecution - 2 Timothy 3:12 *“In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”*.

This has occurred throughout history and even in our own land. Many reports today say that Christians are the most persecuted group throughout the world. In some places it is open hostility and persecution; in others it is quite subtle, but becoming more intense as Christians are insulted, spoken about, lied about and become more marginalised in their societies, in our society. Yet it goes on and may be experienced by some here in their homes, workplaces, even by friends. Are we determined to live godly lives whatever the consequences? If we do so and are persecuted for righteousness, for Jesus' sake then we are blessed and we see:

## **2. The Reason for Jubilation.**

Here the Lord Jesus reverses society's views on suffering persecution and declares it's something we are to rejoice in, to regard as a blessing! The Lord Jesus says what we suffer for righteousness and His sake should cause believers, to rejoice! Naturally we would want to retaliate - either verbally or physically, but as Christians we are not to do so. The Lord Jesus did not when He was on trial, when mocked, hit and spat upon. He had all power to do so. Also we are not to feel resentment. Those who make life difficult for us, persecute us are not to be resented, but prayed for and loved. Humanly this is impossible, extremely difficult, but this is where the grace and help of God comes in. Because of what God has done in our lives through Christ, we are to see such persecutors as blind slaves to sin and Satan, they are only doing his will and bidding. As such they are to be pitied and prayed for.

Yet persecution may cause us to despair, but the Lord Jesus says we are not to do that, but we are to *“Rejoice and be glad”* (v12)!

This is not a silly glib and superficial thing and we grin like a mindless chimpanzee! Neither are we to rejoice in the mere fact of persecution and certainly not pray for persecution - as all persecution is to be regretted and mourned over, for it shows the awfulness of sin and Satan's power in people's lives. Our hearts are to be breaking over any persecution as it shows people's blindness to God and their bondage to the devil.

So what causes us to rejoice in such persecution? It is centres on the fact that we suffer for Jesus' sake and because of righteousness which can teach us much:

**A. It teaches us we are Christians:** it means the new life of Christ has thankfully become evident in our lives and people, even loved ones can see it, but sadly may not like it. Just as the prophets suffered before us because they obeyed God and lived for Him, so too we who follow and obey Him can suffer. It makes us part of the same company of God's people and we are identifiable with God's people. This indicates that we are becoming more and more like Christ - identified with and as Christ's. He was slandered, insulted, lied about, persecuted and we are only being treated as He was treated. The apostles realised this, as we read in Acts 5:41 *"The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name."* This puts an honour on their and our suffering persecution for Jesus' sake, for righteousness sake.

**B. It teaches us where we are going:** suffering for Christ should underline in our hearts and minds that this world is hostile to us **and this world is not our real home**. Our true home is somewhere else and we realise it is heaven. Heaven is our home and our final destination after our pilgrimage in this world. Yes on the way we may be mocked, insulted and persecuted for a

period of time, but what is that compared to everlasting happiness, joy, peace and love in heaven?

This fact is to cause us to rejoice, for ahead of us lies the exceedingly great glory of heaven and our present sufferings are not even worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed **in us, let alone to us!** Yet we will not rejoice as we should if we fail to consider our home destination. The persecution the world gives us basically reinforces the truth that we do not belong here and this is to cause us to consider where we belong and are headed. As we ponder, consider heaven it is to cause us to rejoice and be glad! By considering, dwelling on who we are, where we're going and what waits ahead for us, so our attitudes to our present trials, persecutions and suffering are to be radically altered and to enable us to rejoice.

We live for that day when all our works, even as Christians, will be tried by fire as to what they are - gold, silver, hay or stubble. Yes we will be saved, but there are grace awards which will be ours. What will our work show as to what we have built with upon the foundation of the Lord Jesus? Are we running to win the crown or merely treating it as a fun run? Brothers and sisters in Christ, realise heaven is before us and any persecution we may have should cause us to turn our eyes heavenward and see what is before us – v10b & 12a. The portraits, descriptions in the Bible of heaven show it is a place of undiluted joy, glory, happiness, purity and there we will see the Lord Jesus, we will worship Him in new bodies free from aches, pains, tears, sorrows, limitations or sin. Yet as wonderful as these portraits are, the reality is going to be much, much better!

If people persecute us for Jesus' and righteousness sake, then we can rejoice in such a hope of glory. We are often to consider

heaven and our going home there. Perhaps we may never or seldom do that and maybe our lives could be too earthbound and lived at too low a level. This glorious hope will give us every reason to rejoice and be glad even if we suffer for Jesus' sake.

Perhaps someone here does not know the wonder of this hope of heaven; then listen to what the gospel says. There is a God, the God you can know, the God who will welcome you to heaven if you have the Lord Jesus as your Saviour, who will be with you in every area of your life until you go to heaven. Also He promises to be with you in all the ups and downs of your life until He knows it is time to take you to your heavenly home. That also means He will give us many joys and comforts here on earth. This God wants us all to trust His Son, the Lord Jesus, as our own Saviour. Then we can know and experience, in an ongoing way, the love of God more fully in our lives and we are able to live out the Beatitudes as characteristics of our Christian lives. Yes even if we have hard times, even persecution, we can rejoice at all our God has done, is doing and will do for us. Yet by God's grace and the work and help of the Holy Spirit in our lives we can go on in our lives to live out the rest of the Sermon on the Mount and do so in gratitude for all our Saviour has done for us.