

The Privilege of Persecution

“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness ...” Mat 5:10b

At present, many men, women, and children around the world are facing persecution. Many more will face it in the near future. Indeed, persecution against Christians and Christian standards is now taking shape across the USA, and this persecution is becoming more aggressive and intense with each passing day. As we would prepare for any upcoming event in our life, so we should spiritually prepare for both present and coming persecution. Days of persecution are days to stand up in victory—not flee in defeat!

General Principles on Persecution:

1. Jesus predicted persecution for His disciples.

Joh 15:18–20, *“If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. 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, because of this the world hates you ... If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you ...”*

2. Paul also promised persecution to those living a godly life.

2Ti 3:12, *“Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”*

3. To be persecuted for faith in Jesus Christ is a sign of spiritual commitment.

Gal 4:29, *“But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, **so it is now also**”* (emphasis added).

This verse is very interesting in light of present-day current events. The persecution referred to is Ishmael persecuting Isaac. Islam declares Abraham as their father and regards Ishmael as the son of promise. As Ishmael persecuted Isaac in his day, Islam is now persecuting Jews and Christians (children of Abraham and Isaac) today. Think of how pertinent a verse that was written two thousand years ago is to believers living today—*“so it is now also!”*

4. Jesus emphasized to His disciples both the blessing and eternal reward of persecution.

Mat 5:10–12, *“**Blessed** are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your **reward in heaven** is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you”* (emphasis added).

5. Persecution, as with all forms of suffering, leads to a greater understanding of the character and faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

Phi 3:10, “... *that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.*”

6. God judges those who persecute His children. In the end, they lose; but by the grace and victory of Jesus Christ, we win!

Deu 30:7, “*The LORD your God will inflict all these curses on your enemies and on those who hate you, who persecuted you.*”

There are so many stories in the world of believers who have faced persecution in victory and faith. Many of these stories are recorded for us in books such as *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* or publications put out by Voice of the Martyrs and similar ministries. As we travel abroad in mission work, we often encounter believers in restricted countries who have been persecuted for their faith, and they humbly share their stories with us.

But many other believers have suffered persecution and martyrdom in remote and hidden parts of the world. Their stories are never told—their faith and endurance recorded only by the all-seeing eyes of God. The gruesome details of torture and death often cause our stomachs to churn as we question how they could endure such suffering. But no human being has ever suffered the extent of persecution that the Lord Jesus Christ suffered for us on the cross. As we strive to imitate the character and Person of Jesus Christ in our lives and ministries, let us also strive to imitate His character in times of persecution!

Jesus said, “*For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart*” (Mat 12:34). From the seven sayings of Christ on the cross, we can learn the principles that strengthened His heart with resolve to meet His suffering in faith and victory. Our heart also needs to be strengthened in such a way as to face times of persecution with faith and victory. What better Teacher could we find to give us strength in times of persecution than our own Champion, Lord and Savior? Keep in mind that just previous to these seven sayings, Jesus Christ had been betrayed, arrested, beaten, stripped, scourged, mocked, crowned with thorns, and nailed upon a cross.

Before we get to His seven sayings on the cross, I would like to look at one of the statements of Jesus shortly after His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. In Matthew 27, Jesus stood before the governor and “*the governor questioned Him, saying, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ And Jesus said to him, ‘It is as you say’*” (Mat 27:11). This is an outright confession by Jesus of who He was.

In the same way, we should be always willing to confess our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and not cower before the question, “Are you a Christian?”—no matter what the consequences. We do not want to fall into the same pattern that Peter did when he denied his relationship with Jesus Christ. In Mat 10:23, Jesus told the disciples, “*But whenever they persecute you in this city, flee to the next.*” We are to avoid persecution when at all possible, but this does not ever give us an excuse to deny our faith in Jesus Christ.

The Seven Sayings of Christ on the Cross:

1. ***“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,”*** Luk 23:34 (Isa 53:12). As Jesus began to suffer the extreme pains of crucifixion, He looked at the poor, lost souls who had inflicted this pain on Him and prayed these words of forgiveness to His heavenly Father.

Principle: Show the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ to those who persecute us.

- a. Mat 5:44, *“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”*
- b. Rom 12:14, *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”*
- c. 1Co 4:12b–13a, *“... when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate ...”*

2. ***“Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise,”*** Luk 23:43. Jesus’ attitude of love and forgiveness, while in the midst of extreme suffering, was a strong testimony to those around Him. Indeed, as the thief observed the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ, his eyes and heart were opened to recognize Jesus as the Son of God and the Savior of the world. Jesus saw the thief’s faith and assured him of eternal life.

Principle: Persecution is an opportunity to testify to the world of the love of Christ and the power of the Gospel.

- a. When Paul was under arrest in Rome for preaching the Gospel, he said, *“Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for **the greater progress of the gospel,**”* Phi 1:12; see also Phi 1:13–15 for the complete thought.
 - b. Paul also asked for prayer for boldness to share the Gospel under persecution, *“and pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak,”* Eph 6:19–20.
 - c. Consider the testimony of Paul and Silas in prison, singing and praising God in the midst of persecution, Acts 16. Remember, in this passage, the jailer and his family became believers in Jesus Christ.
 - d. Consider the testimony of Daniel in the lion’s den, Daniel 6.
 - e. Consider the testimony of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego in the fiery furnace, Daniel 3
3. ***“Woman, behold, your son ... Behold, your mother,”*** Joh 19:25–27. To me, this is one of the most beautiful expressions of love that Jesus ever spoke. He obviously loved his mother and knew that at His death, He would no longer be present in bodily form to care for her. But this concern did not keep Him from fulfilling His God-given destiny of being crucified for the sins of the world. Instead, He entrusted Mary’s care into the hands of John and His heavenly Father.

Principle: During times of persecution (especially martyrdom), we must commit the care and future of our loved ones into the hands of our heavenly Father. He is faithful!

- a. *“So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own,”* Mat 6:34. Look at the whole context of this principle in Mat 6:25–34.
 - b. *“... for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven,”* Mat 18:10b (speaking of the little children).
 - c. *“So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish,”* Mat 18:14.
 - d. Scripture assures us of the love and care our heavenly Father has for our loved ones—especially the little ones.
 - e. From *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, Giovanni Pulhus, being persecuted for his Christian faith in the 17th Century, said he was happy to be thought worthy of suffering for the name of Christ. His persecutors tried to coerce a denial from him by asking him to think of the fate of his wife and children, to which he responded, *“I would have my wife and children, as well as myself, to consider their souls more than their bodies, and the next world before this; and with respect to the distress I may leave them in, God is merciful, and will provide for them ...”* He was then executed and his body thrown into the river.
4. **“MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME,”** Mat 27:46.
 These are the most painful and heart-wrenching words ever uttered on the face of the earth. As Jesus was pierced through for the sins of the world, the heavenly Father turned His back on His chosen Son. The earth quaked, and the rocks split in response to the extreme intensity of the moment. The Father forsook His own Son so that we would never be forsaken!

Principle: In times of persecution, He will never leave us and never forsake us.

- a. Heb 13:5b, *“... I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU,”* (emphasis added).
- b. 2Co 4:8–9, *“we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed,”* (emphasis added).
- c. Isa 41:10, *“Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.”*
- d. Psa 37:25, *“I have been young and now I am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken.”*
- e. Psa 9:10, *“And those who know Your name will put their trust in You, for You, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek You.”*
- f. Jer 20:11a, *“But the LORD is with me like a dread champion; therefore my persecutors will stumble and not prevail.”*
- g. Consider again the example of Christ walking in the midst of the fire with Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, Daniel 3. In the midst of persecution, we too can know *“the fellowship of His sufferings.”* Phi 3:10.
- h. Kayla Mueller was captured by ISIS in August of 2013. She was held as a personal sex slave for 18 months before being killed by the enemy. Kayla was a Christian and, before her death, she sent her parents this message, *“I remember mom always telling me that all in all in the end the only one you really have is God. I have come to a place in*

experience where, in every sense of the word, I have surrendered myself to our creator because literally there was no one else. By God and by your prayers I have felt tenderly cradled in freefall,” (emphasis added).

5. **“I am thirsty,”** Joh 19:28.

This is a simple statement revealing to us the humanity of Jesus Christ. While He endured the tortures leading up to and including the cross, His body hurt, His body suffered, and His body became thirsty. Persecution often comes with much physical suffering.

Principle: In times of persecution, God will sustain us physically to win the battle spiritually.

- a. Rom 12:1. *“Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.”*
- b. Phi 4:13, *“I can do all things through Him [Christ] who strengthens me.”*
- c. 2Co 12:9–10, *“And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”*
- d. From *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, under the persecutions in Italy, a layman named Faninus was condemned to death for his bold witness for Jesus Christ. When questioned how he could be so cheerful in the face of death, he replied, *“Christ sustained all manner of pangs and conflicts, with hell and death, on our accounts; and thus, by His sufferings, freed those who really believe in Him from the fear of them.”* He was then strangled and his body burnt to ashes.

6. **“It is finished,”** Joh 19:30.

These words Jesus spoke indicating that the full payment for the sins of the world had been paid through His sacrificial death on the cross. In Joh 4:34, Jesus said, *“My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.”* On the cross, this work was complete. He faithfully fulfilled all that the Father had ordained Him to do.

Principle: If persecution (even martyrdom) is part of the Father’s plan for our life, why would we want to fall short of accomplishing that plan?

- a. Phi 1:21, *“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”*
- b. Heb 12:1b–3, *“... let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility of sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”*
- c. Let it be the goal of our life to say with Paul, *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith,”* 2Ti 4:7.

- d. One event in history stands out as an example of the ultimate sacrifice:

Telemachus was a monk who lived in the 4th century. He felt God saying to him, “Go to Rome.” He was in a cloistered monastery. He put his possessions in a sack and set out for Rome. When he arrived in the city, people were thronging in the streets. He asked, “*Why all the excitement?*” and was told that this was the day that the gladiators would be fighting and killing each other in the coliseum—the day of the games, the circus.

He thought to himself, “Four centuries after Christ and they are still killing each other, for enjoyment?” He ran to the coliseum and heard the gladiators saying, “*Hail to Caesar, we die for Caesar*” and he thought, “this isn’t right.” He jumped over the railing and went out into the middle of the field, got between two gladiators, held up his hands and said “*In the name of Christ, forbear!*”

The crowd protested and began to shout, “*Run him through, run him through!*” A gladiator came over and hit him in the stomach with the back of his sword. It sent him sprawling in the sand. He got up and ran back and again said, “*In the name of Christ, forbear!*” The crowd continued to chant, “*Run him through!*” One gladiator came over and plunged his sword through the little monk’s stomach and he fell into the sand, which began to turn crimson with his blood. One last time he gasped out, “*In the name of Christ forbear.*” A hush came over the 80,000 people in the coliseum. Soon a man stood and left, then another and more, and within minutes all 80,000 had emptied out of the arena.

It was the last known gladiatorial contest in the history of Rome.

When we run our race well to the finish, it also encourages others to run their race of faith well!

7. “**Father, INTO YOUR HANDS, I COMMIT MY SPIRIT,**” Luk 23:46a.

These are the final words of Christ on the cross. Christ spoke these words in confidence of His eternal place of glory in Heaven. “*And having said this, He breathed His last,*” Luk 23:46b. His next breath was taken in eternity; His next blink was face-to-face with the Father and the Spirit. Having fulfilled His mission on earth, He was “*crowned with glory and honor*” for all eternity (Heb 2:7)!

Principle: During times of persecution, we must fix our eyes not on the suffering, but on the eternal reward that awaits the persecuted soul!

- a. Mat 5:10–12, “*Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, **for your reward in heaven is great**, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you,*” (emphasis added).
- b. Jam 1:12, “*Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.*”

- c. Rev 2:10b, *“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”*
- d. 1Pe 1:7, *“that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”*
- e. 2Co 4:16–18, *“Therefore we do not lose heart ... For momentary, light affliction is producing for us **an eternal weight of glory** far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen, for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal,”* (emphasis added).
- f. In Scripture, persecution and glory are synonyms!

In 1Co 1:9, Paul tells us *“God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”* We treasure His faithfulness and His fellowship, but at times that fellowship calls us to share His sufferings for the sake of His name. In light of all the Scriptures we have looked at, let’s consider the suffering of persecution a privilege that Jesus shares with His children. Let us not fear what might come, but trust Him to bring us faithfully through it.

We do not know what the future holds, but we know Who holds the future!