

BLESSED_ *(A Fresh Look @ the Beatitudes)_ The Persecuted*

Now when He (Jesus) saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to Him,² and He began to teach them, saying:³ **"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.¹¹ Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. / ¹³ You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."**

The 8th and final Beatitude is *"Blessed are the persecuted."* This is the only one for which Jesus includes some commentary. My guess is that it's because it would've been the hardest one to swallow. I've not known many who consider harsh or unfair treatment to be a blessing. I'm compelled to make one thing perfectly clear before we go further. Jesus isn't saying that all suffering in and of itself is a blessing_ but there's a blessing for those who suffer for His sake. He's talking of trouble and persecution that comes on us for the sole reason that we are standing up for Him.

When James the apostle was killed by the sword, I doubt the other apostles envied him, or said, *"Man, he sure is blessed."* When Peter and John were later arrested, flogged and imprisoned, I can't imagine them thinking, *"Boy what a blessing this is."* Yet, in Acts 5:41 we read that after they had been arrested yet again, and strongly threatened, that: **"The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name."** Rejoicing, not in spite of the fact they were suffering, but because they were suffering? That seems odd. Later, after Paul was stoned and left for dead_ or when beaten within an inch of his life_ or when denied food and water while locked up for weeks upon end in a deep, dark, cell (See 2nd Corinthians 11) - he had this perspective: **"All those who live godly lives in Christ Jesus will be persecuted..."** (2 Timothy 3:12). But, in 2nd Corinthians 1:5 he writes: **"The more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with His comfort through Christ."** Somehow, Paul saw his life of suffering for Jesus as a human billboard_ a living advertisement_ of God's provision and grace. Jesus promised a *blessing for those who are persecuted for His sake*_ and the early Christians believed they were actually experiencing that blessing. They even considered the fact that they were being persecuted to be a blessing. Why? There are at least 4 reasons.

They believed the persecution would help them to mature. In Romans 5 Paul writes: **¹ Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.³ Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope.** Notice he said that he rejoiced in his suffering because it was producing perseverance_ and in the process, developing his character.

I've heard that *"Whatever doesn't kill you will make you stronger."* Not sure that's always true, but Paul believed that it could be_ and should be_ the end result for believers. Many Christians I know have become bitter instead of better in the midst of their difficulties, but this should never be the case. In **James chapter 1**, we read: **² Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.** Evidently, James understood Jesus' promise much the way Paul did.

They believed the persecution was evidence of a living faith. Listen carefully to **1st Peter 4:13ff**: **"Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you're insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵ If you suffer, it shouldn't be as a murderer, a thief, or any other kind of criminal_ or even as a meddler. ¹⁶ However, if you suffer as a Christian, don't be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that Name."** Peter's point seems to be that if someone mocked or insulted them for their faith in Jesus, that they should view it as a compliment. It indicated that their faith was evident_ and not because they were wearing witness wear or had a fish symbol on the back of their car.

They believed the persecution was an opportunity to bear witness (testify) for Christ. They saw their persecution to be a platform to speak about Jesus. In **2nd Peter 3:13ff** it says this: **"Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened." ¹⁵ But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."** Those who push apologetics often quote **verse 15** to promote some theological argument. Yet, this is not a debate on a college campus or even an evangelistic approach on the street corner. It's recognizing that troubles can provide a pulpit to tell folks of our eternal hope in Jesus.

They believed the persecution could make them more like Christ. Jesus said that when they suffered persecution, they were in good company. The prophets of old were also persecuted. Paul made this statement in **Philippians 3**: **¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.** I long ago discarded the idea that Paul was saying he wanted to be nailed to a cross like Jesus to ensure that he'd be bodily resurrected. I believe he's referring to dying to himself, and living a new life with resurrection power. Paul believed suffering for Jesus would make him more like Jesus.

Now_ believing all those things motivated them to keep sharing their faith no matter the hindrances or hardships. They accepted the persecution_ and even expected it. People endure painful processes to improve their looks or status among their peers. (*cosmetic surgery, piercings, tattoos, eyebrow waxes, dental work*) Others subject themselves to strenuous exercise or starvation diets_ or have invasive surgeries and procedures to improve their mobility or quality of life. They face it, convinced they'll be better off for it. Yet, when it comes to spiritual things like growing and maturing to be the people God wants us to be in His kingdom? Let's just say, if it's going to cause us any discomfort, many of us are not sure it's worth it. ***The blessing is the Kingdom of God.***