

Promised More than Persecution

Matthew 10:21-33 (NIV)

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 You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. ²³ When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. ²⁴ "The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. ²⁵ It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household! ²⁶ "So do not be afraid of them, for 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. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. ³⁰ And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. ³² "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. ³³ But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

Last week, in our Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus directed us to ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers into his harvest field since the harvest of souls is plentiful but the workers are few. He then immediately commissioned his 12 disciples to be the initial answer to that prayer. These men – Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon, and Judas – were empowered by God to go out and tell others about Jesus. "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive our demons." (Matthew 10:8)

As they were getting ready to shout it from the rooftops that their perfect substitute, Jesus, was here, that Satan will be completely defeated by him and that all our sins are paid for, Jesus tells them how it will go: "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves... you will be flogged in the synagogues..." (Matthew 10:16a, 17b) "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death." (verse 21) You will be persecuted for going and telling people about me and what I am doing for them. Expect it because even Jesus, your Lord and God, was persecuted. "The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master... If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!" (verses 24, 25b)

Well, that puts a damper on wanting to get out there and shout Jesus from the rooftops. There's good reason that people make a rule of not talking Jesus with others: they know that he's divisive. Not all families are united when it comes to what we believe. Many of you know the pain and the heartache that comes when children wander from Christ even though you brought them up to believe, when they accuse you of teaching them a lie by raising them to know and believe in God, when a parent is dismissive of your devotion and dedication to God, when an atheist sibling calls you a hypocrite. We pray that God and his Word would be the central focus and rallying point for a family, but we know that many times it's a contentious subject. We are wounded the most when Christ is a source of division and hurt among our families because these are the people we love most and want them desperately to be in heaven with us.

And the hurt and persecution doesn't stop at the family level. "You will be hated by everyone because of me," Jesus said. (verse 22a) Can I take that? Can I handle that? Try as we might to say things like, "It doesn't bother me what other people think," but it still does. Jesus' words promising persecution were enough to make the disciples afraid. Maybe they did for you as well.

For me, it wasn't so much fear that gripped me with the promise of persecution but this thought: "God, I know why you are sending us out. Only you have the words of eternal life. Only you save. So, why are you promising us that we are going to be persecuted for telling others about you? Why don't you promise that you will protect us from persecution and hatred, that it will just bounce right off of us so that we can go out and fearlessly proclaim you and what you have done for us without any thought of negative repercussion? Can't you just give us some kind of divine armor that protects us from every persecution, that no one will hate us, no one will insult us? I mean, you are all powerful. You can do that. It would make it a whole lot easier sharing you with others."

Jeremiah the prophet wrestled with the same thing as we heard in our first Bible reading today. The Lord had specifically called him to preach his Word to his people promising that he would be with him and rescue him. But as Jeremiah confronted false prophets and unrepentant kings in God's holy city of Jerusalem, he despaired. "You deceived me, LORD, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction.

So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long.” (Jeremiah 20:7-8) With a promise of persecution for telling others about Jesus, who of us doesn’t feel like Jeremiah?

Why does God not just put persecution proof armor on us and then send us out? I honestly don’t know. But I’ve read enough of God’s Word to know that he doesn’t give us his Word so that we can figure him all out. In fact, he tells us that his ways and his thoughts are higher than ours. God communicates himself and what he does for us in his Word, but he doesn’t say that I give you my Word that you will understand everything I do and why I do it. I am finite while God is infinite. He sees all of human history and future at one time while I have to live in the moment, occasionally reflecting on the past and having vague ideas of what might come. I know that I don’t always make the best decisions or judgment calls. But God is perfect, which means that his decisions and his judgments are perfect. He doesn’t say, “After you figure me out, go and tell others about me.” He simply says, “Follow me. Listen to my voice, and then tell others about me so that more can be saved.”

God has done many great things for us. He did the impossible for us by living perfectly for us to fill us with his perfect life and by sacrificing himself to pay for and erase our mountain of sins. He did this so that we would live with him in the perfect, persecution free life in heaven forever. We know that God is loving and compassionate and caring. But he never promises us an easy life. What do we do with this?

Well, let’s change the why to what. What does Jesus tell us in the face of impending persecution? “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” (verses 29-31) Not even this little bird that is worth so little is outside of God the Father’s care. Nothing befalls the sparrow unless he allows it, and there are millions, if not billions, of them in our world. The Father takes care of you so much more than all of those birds. He will not allow any persecution to fall upon you that can rip you from his care. None of it is outside of his control. No persecutor, even the worst, most hateful anti-Christian that can be mustered, will ever destroy your body and your soul. His promised care for us is too great to let that happen.

God promises more than persecution; he promises to rescue us in the end. In fact, he even tells us that we can flee persecution, not just stand and take it while also clinging to the same promise as Jeremiah did: “But the LORD is with me like a mighty warrior; so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced; their dishonor will never be forgotten.” (Jeremiah 20:11) Our persecutors will have to stand in judgment before the Lord, having their body and soul destroyed in hell.

Is it worth it to suffer this persecution for sharing Christ? When we consider the end results, then, yes; it’s worth it every time. Jesus said, “The one who stands firm to the end will be saved,” (verse 22b) and, “Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.” (verses 32-33) Because of what God has done for us, we know that any suffering, any persecution, that we endure here on earth is only temporary. The eternal benefits far outweigh the momentary suffering. God has promised us a crown of righteousness when our end comes as we make him known to others.

By making Jesus known to others, proclaiming him from the rooftops, speaking him in the daylight, people will know what God has done for them. As we share Jesus, acknowledging him before others, even while being persecuted, this is how people are saved, how they have all the same spiritual benefits that we have – all our sins wiped away, covered in Christ’s perfection, belonging to God and his kingdom forever in heaven. The Holy Spirit will use this message to bring others to this same happily ever after with God as us when he takes us to heaven and we never have any persecution ever again.

Because some will reject God, Jesus promised that we would experience persecution for sharing him with others. But he promises more than just persecution. He promises that our persecutors will not prevail. He promises that he will continue to watch over us, even more than he watches over every sparrow in the sky. He promises to save our body and soul from the fires of hell and instead give us a belonging and dwelling with him forever in heaven where we will never be persecuted and harassed ever again. “So don’t be afraid.” God promises you more than persecution. He promises to rescue you. “You are worth more than many sparrows.” (verse 31) Amen.