

INTRODUCTION

I want to bring this short series on the beatitudes to an end by finishing the verses that we looked at last time. We discovered last time that if we are serious minded Christians then we will be persecution. There is no doubt about that and there is no way of escaping it.

The only way to escape it is to disobey the Lord and fail to walk consistently with him but if we deliberately do that then we have every right to question our profession of faith.

But persecution will take various forms as we saw last time there can be physical persecution and many of our fellow believers in other parts of the world are facing physical persecution right now. We also saw that persecution takes the form of verbal attacks to our face and false accusations spoken behind our backs. The latter two are the most likely type of persecution that we face in our own day especially the last one.

However we must make sure by our lives that the persecution we face is for the right reasons. It should be for righteousness sake because we are followers of Christ and not for any other reason. We must live in such a way for Christ that we do not give our enemies any justification for their accusations and abuse. Sadly far too often the things that are said about us either to our face or behind our backs do have at least a measure of truth in them and our enemies do have some justification for their accusations.

Now we come today to consider again these verses.

1. THE PROMISE TO THE PERSECUTED (v 10)

Yes persecution of Christians can be severe, sometimes very severe and the price that we pay for being a Christian can be very high indeed but compared to what we gain even a martyr's price is small.

Each one of the beatitudes begins with the word "blessed" as we have seen but if you notice with this beatitude there is a double blessing (vs. 10 & 11), almost to reinforce the truth that although persecution is hard it is worth enduring because of the blessings we receive. The particular blessing that is promised here for those who are persecution is the Kingdom of heaven. In other words what Jesus is saying is that persecution is clear evidence that you are in God's kingdom therefore the blessing that you receive through persecution is the assurance that you are in his Kingdom and the many blessings that being in the kingdom brings.

Now belonging to God's kingdom brings blessings now in this world and ultimately the blessings are all realised in heaven itself, which is why it is called the Kingdom of heaven. They come from heaven and are fulfilled completely and realised fully in heaven. The blessings that belonging to the kingdom of heaven bring in the here and now can be summed up with the thought that the Lord is with us.

That means that we are made right with God, that we have our sins forgiven and that we are assured of our heavenly home but it also means that whatever we face in this world the Lord is with us and is working out his purposes for us. Do you remember how Joseph suffered for being faithful to God? Think about Daniel and his three friends and remember how the Lord was with these men working out his purposes.

Of course having the Lord with us does not mean that like them everything will work out well in this world. God's purpose for us does mean that we might have to suffer greatly for being a Christian

or it might even mean death. But belonging to the kingdom of heaven means that we have the God of heaven indwelling us giving us the strength that we need to face persecution as well as the joy and peace that is necessary to persevere through those periods of persecution.

The blessing of the kingdom of heaven in this world is the assurance that no matter what we face or no matter how severe the trial God is in control working out his ultimate purposes for us and that no matter what we might have to face, no persecution is ever in vain for we will know God's blessing both now and ultimately in heaven.

Even persecution that leads to death is not in vain for God uses such persecutions for his own ultimate end and glory. So whatever we have to face whether it is false accusations or verbal insults or physical persecution let's remember that it is through persecution that God will give us that gift of true happiness. This blessedness does not depend on outward circumstances or personal well being.

Ultimately of course belonging to the kingdom of heaven brings us the blessing of living in God's heavenly kingdom forever. Imagine living in heaven enjoying God's presence right throughout eternity. We will be living in a perfect new world and for the first time in our experience living in a perfect world as perfect people enjoying a perfect relationship with our perfect God.

Therefore whatever we are asked by our heavenly Father to face upon this earth it will all be worth enduring in the light of what we will receive in our heavenly home. It is not that persecution earns us our heavenly home but it is simply because we have a heavenly home that we face the persecution. Just imagine yourself in heaven enjoying that blissful relationship with our God through Jesus Christ.

If we can remember our time on earth in heaven, do you think that we will regret the times when we were verbally abused or when people made false accusations against us behind our backs? Do you think that those men and women who have died for the faith are in heaven regretting it?

Of course not, all the troubles and persecution that we might face here on earth will seem so unimportant compared to the glories of heaven. O as we endure them here on earth they seem at times unbearable but in heaven the glories will be so immense that we will not be able to compare them with what we had to suffer in this world. Even if this world takes from us every possession and every freedom and every comfort or every satisfaction of physical life, it can never take from us our place in the kingdom of heaven. It cannot rob us of our relationship with God either in this world or in eternity.

Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are persecuted for righteousness sake or for the sake of Christ in order to encourage us to bear up under the persecution that we might be going through at this moment of time.

Those false accusation that our work colleagues make towards us or the verbal insults that we might have to face even from our loved ones is an indication that we are in God's kingdom and therefore it should encourage us to bear up by the grace of God for the promise is that "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Therefore the benefit of belonging to the kingdom of heaven is ours now in the midst of our persecutions and ultimately we receive the fullness of those benefits when we finally reach our heavenly home whether that is through death by natural causes or thought death which comes as a result of persecution. Whatever the world does to us, it cannot affect our possession of God's heavenly kingdom.

2. OUR ATTITUDE TO PERSECUTION (v 12)

The believer's response to persecution of whatever kind should not be one of sadness and complaint but one of rejoicing. Because we belong to Christ we are no longer of this world but we are in the world to serve our Lord in the same way that the Lord Jesus was sent into our world to serve. In the next few verses in this chapter we are told that believers are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (vs. 13-14).

Therefore if our salt is going to have a flavouring and preserving effect upon our world and if our light is going to enlighten our world then we must be active within our world. We must live godly lives within this world of ungodliness. We have not been transformed by the grace of God and given the wonderful truth of the gospel to hide ourselves away in our homes in the hope that we will have an easy life.

No we are to be involved in our world seeking to enlighten the world through the clear proclamation of the gospel and through consistent holy living (vs. 15-16).

When we live as salt and light then we will have an affect upon the world and the world will not like our godly influence and therefore the result will be persecution. Our saltiness and light will be resented and rejected but what are we to do? What attitude are we to display at such times. We are to rejoice and be glad.

The word translated "rejoice" and "be glad" comes from a Greek word that means, "to rejoice greatly" or "to be overjoyed" which is why some translations have "be exceedingly glad" the literal meaning of the word is "to skip or jump with happy excitement." Jesus uses a Greek mood which means that this is more than a suggestion but it a command, we are to be over the moon with joy when we face persecutions for righteousness sake.

Now how often are we overjoyed when people make false accusations against us because of our godliness or because we belong to Christ? Often we get worried, upset or extremely down but we are commanded to be overjoyed and our failure to do so is to disobey, it is to commit the sin of omission.

Now our world can take away a great deal from us but it can never take away our joy and gladness. We know that nothing that the world can do to us in permanent, when people attack us for Christ's sake then we should rejoice and be glad. Jesus gives us two reasons why we should respond in this way.

a) Our Reward Is In Heaven – Our present life is no more than a mist that appears for a little while and then disappears again (James 4:14). But heaven is forever. This is why Jesus tells us not to store up treasure for ourselves here on earth (Matthew 6:19-20) because what really matters is our eternal rewards. All that we do for the Lord here on earth especially suffering for him is reaping us eternal rewards.

Jesus describes this reward as great and if Jesus calls something great then it must really be great. Rewards for Christians is used as a motivation for Christians to continue in their service for him and in this context it is used as a motivation for continuing to face the persecution that comes our way for Christ's sake. Of course we serve our Lord and face persecution primarily because we love Him but as a secondly motivation to persevere under persecution the Lord tells us that there is great reward in heaven for being prepared to suffer for Him. We are never told exactly what this reward maybe and I don't think it is worth speculating. Is the reward heaven itself? Is it some sort of reward in heaven?

I don't know but we ought to remind ourselves that there is great reward in serving our God especially so when we willingly face persecution for his sake.

b) The Prophets Were Also Persecuted. – We are not the only believers to be persecuted because the prophets of old were also persecuted because of their faith in God. Therefore when we suffer for Christ's sake we are in the best possible company. To be persecuted is to stand in line with the prophets it is to stand shoulder to shoulder with some of the great spiritual giants of the past.

Persecution for the prophets was a mark of their faithfulness to God and it shows our faithfulness as well. When we are persecuted we know that we belong to the kingdom of heaven because we are experiencing the very things that the prophets of the same kingdom experienced. Just listen to some of the persecutions that the prophets in the past suffered (Hebrews 11:36-38). Although it is true that the world is not worthy of such people every persecuted believer is worthy of them for we stand in the same line with such godly people.

No wonder we are told to rejoice and be glad for we are being put in the same category as people like Samuel, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Daniel plus many others. They rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer for their Lord therefore we too should rejoice that we are privileged enough to suffer in the same way as the godly people of the past suffered.

Therefore as we finish let us remember that we belong to God's kingdom we are promised a place in heaven because we belong to the kingdom of heaven but there is a price to pay. That price is persecution sometimes physical, sometimes verbal and often false accusations.

But remember whatever price we have to pay is nothing compared to the price that Christ paid in order that we could belong to his heavenly kingdom. Also we need to remember that whatever we face in this world will be abundantly compensated in heaven. Others have been willing to be persecuted for righteousness sake and we should consider it s privilege to be mentioned in the same group as the prophets.

No wonder our attitude to persecution should be on of joy and gladness, not because of our persecution but because of our reward in heaven and because we are facing what every true believer in the past faced and by extension what every true believer in the future will face.

The intensity of the persecution might be different but the reason for it is not but the result of it is also the same. Just like every other believer in the past and present and in the future our reward is very great indeed.

Amen