

“THE JOY OF PERSECUTION”
Psalm 119:81-88, 2 Corinthians 4:5-15, Acts 5:17-42
June 29-30, 2024

“The angry crowd yelled after the lone bicyclist, ‘If we see you again, we will cut off your feet. Then see if you can ride your bike!’

“This was not the first time Milon G. had been threatened by angry crowds of Muslims. But such threats have not quenched his zeal to take the truth of God’s Word to his countrymen.

“I ride to the villages on my bicycle and carry Christian literature. In the rains, I hold an umbrella in one hand and steer with the other. I often fall down and get muddy and scratched. At night, I hold a flashlight. I sing from the Psalms when I ride. The Christians I meet do not have an extra blanket for me, so I try to make it back home to sleep.’

“Milon was a teenager when a friend gave him some Gospel booklets. ‘I hid them in a steel trunk in my bedroom. At night I would get my key, open the trunk, and read with a kerosene lamp. Having studied in a Muslim fundamental school for twelve years, I had known about Jesus as mentioned in the Koran, but I didn’t know Him as Savior. I accepted Jesus in 1992 and was baptized secretly 400 kilometers from my home.’

“Ever since then, Milon has been persecuted by Muslims. ‘I sold clothing in the local market and began placing some Christian books in my shop for other Christians. When Muslim men learned of this, they would walk into my shop and just take shirts, pants, and socks from the shelf without paying for them. If I asked for money they threatened to beat me. Anytime someone is interested in the booklets, I give them one.’

“Milon says, ‘We are going through many problems, but still we have Jesus Christ. We have peace through Him, and we have the hope that when we die we will go to heaven.’

Milton is sold out for Jesus, wanting everyone around him to know of the Salvation that only Jesus can give. His heart is so filled with love for his countrymen that he is willing to endure great hardships in order that they might know Jesus Christ, and have Him as their Savior, too.

The apostle Paul tells us, “*We are confident of all this because of our great trust in God through Christ. It is not that we think we can do anything of lasting value by ourselves. Our only power and success come from God. He is the One who has enabled us to represent His new covenant*” (2 Corinthians 3:4-6 NLT).¹ The only possibility we have to endure persecution is to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and let Him guide our hearts and minds through the Holy Spirit. And when we love Jesus as much as Milton G. does, we, also, will be ready to share our faith with those around us.

It’s rare that any of us will face this kind of persecution for our faith in America, however. So it is hard to for us to comprehend what full blown persecution looks like or feels like. But it is a real thing happening to thousands of people around the world. Because they claim the Name of Jesus Christ as their Savior, these faithful Christians are willing to face almost unbelievable hardships. They will not back down on their faith. In fact, they are even more driven to share the great Good News of Jesus Christ with others because they know the difference that Jesus made in their lives, and they want others to experience the freedom Jesus gives through Salvation.

When persecutions do come to us, though, mild as they may be for us, we are often quick to get angry and become hateful toward those who are persecuting us. And it might become easy for us to question God if He really cares for us. Is it worthwhile to be a follower of Jesus if we’re going to have to face difficulties?

But being a follower of Jesus Christ does not eliminate us from suffering and persecution. On the contrary, Jesus told His disciples, “*Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed My teaching, they will obey yours also*” (John 15:20). We should come rather to expect persecution as we live out our faith in Jesus Christ. Not with anger and bitterness, but with joy at being considered worthy to receive it in Jesus.

You see, we have an enemy who desperately wants to defeat us and turn us away from faith in the Lord, so the first thing to come against us when we make the choice to follow Jesus as our Savior is

¹ (D.C. Talk & Voice of the Martyrs, *Jesus Freaks*, [Tulsa, OK: Albury Publishing, 1999] pg. 94-95)

some sort of attack in order to convince us not to follow Jesus. And as we are attacked, we have two different options in how we respond: we can question God why, when we've put our faith and trust in Him, He should allow us to be attacked. Or we will let that attack drive us deeper in our relationship with the Lord, realizing that we can do nothing without the Lord's help.

King David expressed the hurt from the persecution he experienced in the words of Psalm 119:81-88, but he also found the need for the Lord to be with him in order to endure it. He says, "*How long must Your servant wait? When will You punish my persecutors? The arrogant dig pits to trap me, contrary to Your law. All Your commands are trustworthy; help me, for I am being persecuted without cause. They almost wiped me from the earth, but I have not forsaken Your precepts*" (199:84-87).

David knew the anguish of persecution, but he did not waver in his faith, but let that persecution drive him into a deep dependence on God to bless him and then let God deal with the ones persecuting him. David kept praising and worshipping the Lord, despite what was happening around him. He says with confidence, "*In Your unfailing love preserve my life, that I may obey the statutes of Your mouth*" (119:88). That is the sign of a true follower of the Lord our God, one who will not desert his or her faith, even though tested horribly.

Likewise, the apostle Paul encourages us to draw near to the Lord Jesus, even when persecution is happening. And we are not to let persecution prevent us from living as a witness for Jesus. He tells the people of Corinth (and us), "*But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that His life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you*" (2 Cor. 4:7-12).

Persecution is never fun, but when we use the occasions of persecution for God's glory, we are encouraged and given hope for our everyday lives. If we can continue to lift up the Lord Jesus Christ,

even in the persecution, we will be demonstrating the great love of God to those around us, and that same love might attract others to Jesus Christ, as we demonstrate our love for them in Him.

But Paul mentions that we have “*this treasure in jars of clay*” (2 Cor. 4:7). The treasure is the light of Christ, given to each person upon their accepting Jesus Christ as their Savior. Paul uses the image of that light in clay jars to help us to understand that our bodies are very insignificant and unattractive compared to the light that we are given in Christ Jesus. It’s not about us as humans that make the light of Jesus special, but rather the light of Christ that makes each of us valuable as we let Him live through us. It is for us to understand that the all-surpassing power of Jesus Christ living in us comes not from us, but from God in us. It is the life of Jesus Christ given to us that makes us worthy of being servants of Jesus wherever we go. And it is that life of Jesus in us that helps us through any persecution in order that we might shine His light to those around us living in very dark places.

Then Paul lists four situations in his life that demonstrate the life of Jesus living in him. He says, “*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed*” (4:8), meaning that even though he might be surrounded, he was never left without an option or an avenue in which to move; “*...perplexed, but not in despair,*” meaning he faced tremendous challenges, but never lost hope; “*...persecuted, but not abandoned*” (4:9), meaning that he was hounded by his adversaries, but not left to the adversary’s mercy; “*...struck down, but not destroyed,*” stating that he had been knocked down (even stoned), but was not permanently grounded (not killed). Throughout all four of these situations, it was the life and power of Jesus that enabled him to continue to work toward living the Gospel before the people.

Those are areas in our own lives that we can claim as we let the light of Jesus guide our own hearts. Illness may wrack our bodies, but through it all we can remain persistent in living out the joy of the Lord. False accusations can be made against us that cause separations from families and friends, but our faith in Jesus allows us to expose the truth to everyone. We may be arrested or detained, but that is not enough to force us to give up our faith. We might even be brought to our knees because of some tremendous hardship, but as we depend upon the Lord Jesus for His strength, it is never enough to

completely wipe us out. When we have faith in Jesus Christ, we have His all-surpassing power within us to give us the strength and courage to continue to live our faith and let the light of Christ shine out of these earthly vessels to attract many more to the love of Jesus.

These are the things that happened in the lives of the apostles and followers of Jesus as they boldly lived their faith in Jesus. After they performed so many healings of the people, and did so many marvelous signs and wonders in the Name of Jesus, the people of Jerusalem were beginning to take notice and they began to accept Jesus as their Savior and Messiah. Teaching the people to love Jesus grew the church, and thousands began to follow the teachings of Jesus. In the middle of these wonderful results, another attack comes to them. Listen to the next portion of our study of the Book of Acts. This is Acts 5:17-42. (READ Acts 5:17-42)

The Sadducees were upset due to the suspicion or fear of the rival new church that had started through Jesus Christ. This new “religion” was multiplying hand over fist. The Sadducees believed that there was no resurrection from the dead (Acts 23:8), so when the apostles and other followers of Jesus were teaching and preaching that Jesus was the Messiah, died on the cross and then rose from the dead, it was an affront to their beliefs. The followers of Jesus were proclaiming what they had seen and heard, for they had physically witnessed Jesus risen from the dead. And then seeing that many were going to the Temple and many Jews in Jerusalem were beginning to believe that Jesus had risen, victorious over death, this sent the Sadducees into a great resentment of the success of the apostles.

Also noticing that the apostles had blatantly disregarded their warning not to teach or preach in Jesus’ Name, the hackles of the Sadducees began to rise even more. They were desperately trying to defend their own beliefs, that there was no resurrection, and that there were no angels or spirits. So when the apostles begin preaching that there really are angels, spirits, and resurrection from the dead, the intentions of the Sadducees were to bring an immediate stop to it all. If everyone went to believing what the apostles were teaching, where would that leave the party of the Sadducees?

Amazing things happen when we try to defend and protect only one way of thinking - especially

if it's being presented as being wrong. Oh my, the things we do and say to one another! Human nature kicks in to protect what we believe, even if it might be incorrect.

So the high priest and the party of the Sadducees have the apostles arrested and put into the common jail overnight (a second time for Peter and John). But a strange thing happens - Luke records the intervention of an angel who "*opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. 'Go, stand in the temple courts,' he told them, 'and tell the people all about this new life'*" (Acts 5:19-20). When man plans, God laughs! The Sadducees thought they could contain the apostles - not a chance.

Of course there is confusion and amazement the next day when the Sanhedrin sends the temple guards to the jail to fetch the apostles, and the report comes back - "They're not there! Everything is secured, but no one was in the cell" (5:23). And they found out that the very apostles who had been arrested and jailed the night before were right back in the temple, preaching the very same things about Jesus being the Risen Savior of the world! Certainly the wonder of that moment would have hit them all.

However, there was "justice" to be had, so the apostles are rounded up again, and peacefully brought before the Sanhedrin, only to be chastised about teaching and preaching in the Name of Jesus. They have been informing everyone what had happened, exposing the people to the tactics of the Sanhedrin with regard to the attempted extermination of Jesus. But God had raised Him from the dead as proof that He was the Messiah, the Savior who brings forgiveness to all who will believe in Him.

The response the temple leaders get is the very same that Peter and John had told them before, only more directly, "*We must obey God rather than human beings! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead - whom you killed by hanging Him on a cross. God exalted Him to His own right hand as Prince and Savior that He might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him'*" (Acts 5:29-32).

I can only imagine the fury of those in the Sanhedrin that day. They were losing control of

everything, and when these common ordinary men start preaching to THEM about the things of God, Ooo, the belligerence comes right out of them. They are so angry they want all of the apostles put to death right there on the spot. Here they were being held accountable for their illegal actions against Jesus, being told that everything they believe is wrong, and how God can still forgive them if they believe in Jesus as the Messiah from God. I'm not sure humility was a big part of the leaders' lives, so their pride comes out in full force, demanding that "justice" be done to remove them from any guilt.

Ever find yourself in a situation like that before? Having to chastise and correct a person or a group in leadership that has wrongfully done something, only to be confronted with their righteous indignation going into full overdrive to prove themselves right?

But the apostles were only telling people what they had seen and heard. They were being true witnesses of Jesus, sharing that He was truly God's Messiah sent to Israel for their salvation so that they could be the shining light into the world of the hope we have in Jesus Christ. God's intention was to fulfill the promises made to Israel about a Messiah who would bring life and peace to the whole nation. But up to this point, the Jewish leaders were rejecting God's Messiah - first by killing Jesus, then paying off the guards at Jesus' tomb, telling them to spread the news that the disciples of Jesus had stolen His body instead of Him rising from the dead, and then by refusing to consider the Word of God to see if He was really fulfilling His promises to them. God was giving the leaders of the temple multiple opportunities to find His Salvation, but just as they had done to the prophets, they were not about to listen to local yokels who were making such grand statements about God's answering the prayers and hopes of Israel. The leaders were missing and rejecting God's gift of Salvation.

So they became so angry that they lost their common sense. But Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, called for a closed session of the Sanhedrin, and explained that this might be truly God at work. He didn't come right out and say that they could have been wrong about Jesus, but he did convince them to not try to stand in God's ways if this was Him working. *"For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find*

yourselves fighting against God” (Acts 5:38-39). And they listened to Gamaliel. They decided to try to ignore the teachings of the apostles, but we’ll see that it was only a short lived attempt.

But to try to prove their point again, they had the apostles flogged, and given the warning once more not to preach or teach in the Name of Jesus. And, being let go once again, the apostles go right back to teaching about Jesus being the Messiah, in the temple courts and from house to house.

When we are sorely persecuted like that, it is easy for us to give up and cower away, only to follow orders and do what we’ve been told to do. But how are the people of the world ever going to hear about the marvelous work that God has done for us through Jesus Christ if we keep it to ourselves? How will people hear about the forgiveness of sins and salvation given to all who turn to Jesus if we give up under persecution? It is better for us to “*obey God rather than human beings,*” and then trust that God will deliver us from the persecution we face, testifying to what we have seen and heard for all to hear. They will try to ignore us, but people will hear the Good News, and many will accept it.

Verse 41 should become a life verse for each one of us. “*The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name*” of Jesus. When we are persecuted for our faith in Jesus, may we also be filled with joy that we, too, are counted worthy to suffer for the Name of Jesus. Even though we may be beaten and scarred, let there be real joy in the fact that we are His witnesses, telling of the Salvation of Jesus to everyone. Let the joy of the Lord be our strength. God will give us the courage we need to continue as His servants.

Let’s pray; Father, we thank You for being an awesome God who has changed our lives through Jesus Christ. Thank You for Your Salvation given to us through Jesus. He is truly the Way, the Truth and the Life, and we are privileged to be His disciples. Give us the courage and faith to trust in Your Holy Spirit to guide us every day, especially when we are persecuted. Give us the words to speak, the heart for the persecutors, and the love of Jesus to share with them. And give us the determination to stand up for You rather than to bow to human beings. Guide us each day of this week so that we might have the opportunity to tell another about “*this new life*” we have in Jesus. May we be bold in all we do and say, through Jesus Christ, our Savior, our Lord, and our Messiah. AMEN.