

Persecuted for a purpose:
God ordains persecution for our progress and joy
1 Peter 4:12-16
Sunday, July 12th 2015

In AD 177 Persecution broke out against Christians in Lyons which is in modern day France. The persecution of Blandina, a Christian slave girl, is typical of the incredible suffering endured by this church.

A letter from the church says, “Blandina was filled with such power that those who by turns kept torturing her in every way from dawn until evening were worn out and exhausted. Blandina stood firm in her faith, and when she was returned to the prison, she encouraged the other prisoners to stand firm as well.

However, her ordeal was far from over. Later she was tied to a cross in the arena and wild beasts were let loose on her. The letter says that others who were being tortured in the arena gained strength by looking at Blandina and hearing her prayers, for they saw in her the image of the Christ who had suffered for them all.

Later, Blandina was brought back into the arena, scourged, put on a redhot iron grill, and finally gored and tossed by a bull before she died. Irenaeus wrote that soon after this persecution the church began a mission to the rural population of the area.

So the faith of Blandina and the other Martyrs not only saw the church through a time of terrible suffering, it also helped lay the foundation for mission in the next decade.

So why am I opening with this story this morning? Because I want you to understand that when we talk about being persecuted for our faith in Christ, we are talking about something that has a **real cost**.

We are talking about the loss of social status, jobs, possessions, and lives. We are talking about vile insults, hatred, imprisonment, and physical torture. **We are talking about something that most of us have never experienced.**

So why are we talking about it? We are talking about it for two reasons:

One, God’s Word does not tell us that we **might** be persecuted, but that we **will** be persecuted.

Two, in light of the recent Supreme Court decision on gay marriage, and the growing marginalization of Christianity as a whole, persecution is something that I believe is coming, and we should be prepared for it.

So let's open our Bible's to 1 Peter 4:12-16. This passage will not only be a reminder to us that persecution is coming, but will help us to understand God's purposes for persecution. **Those purposes being our progress in faith, our joy, and His glory.**

So I have four points for you this morning. The first, second, and fourth point will speak to God's purposes for persecution in our lives. The third point, however, is a warning for us to make sure that we are not being persecuted for ungodly reasons.

So let's stand together in honor of the reading of God's word and let's listen to the words of 1 Peter 4:12-16. The Word of God says this:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.

Let's pray.

1. God ordains persecution for our progress in faith. (V.12)

1 Peter 4:12:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

Listen to this situation:

A dad says to his son: "Now son, you have your license now, and I want you to know that speeding is a crime and if you choose to speed, at some point you will get a ticket." The son acknowledges his dad's words and then leaves.

Two months later the son is going 65mph in a 55mph zone, gets pulled over, and gets a ticket. The son comes home and says to his dad, I got pulled over and I can't believe he gave me a ticket. To which the dad replies, "I don't know why you are surprised, I told you this would happen."

I told you this would this would happen.

Now, we all get this situation and many of us would be like the dad and say, **“I told you so...I told you this would happen, but you didn’t listen.”**

However, if we are honest, when it comes to persecution we are like the son. We believe persecution will happen to people like Prince Paul in Ghana, or the Yoder’s going to Mozambique, but it won’t happen to us.

But Peter has written his letter to elect exiles. These people are not literal exiles, but men and women who have a home that is not in this world. **And if we are all Christians here this morning then these words have been written for us.**

Peter is writing these words to all of us who are prosperous, mainly non-persecuted, American Christians so that we will not be surprised when persecution comes.

We will not be surprised when we lose our tax-exempt status as a church.

We will not be surprised when we start to lose friends.

We will not be surprised when we start to lose family members.

And we will not be surprised when we start to lose jobs, all because we stand for the truth of God’s Word.

Instead, we will be able to stand firm under these persecutions knowing that God has brought them upon us for a purpose. **And that purpose, according to 1 Peter 4:12 is to test, refine, and strengthen our faith.**

James 1:3-4 echoes this idea when it says:

...for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

So persecution is a means that God uses in our life so that we would endure and persevere in faith as we wait for the day when Jesus returns when we will be complete and perfect in His sight.

This means that persecution is a blessing from God that He wants to use in our life to help us progress and endure in faith.

And if persecution is a blessing from God, **then it is also true that He is the one who ordains and wills for us to be persecuted and suffer.**

As 1 Peter 4:19 says:

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

This is exactly what Steve brought to us last week when he showed us from the book of Habbakuk how God orchestrates trouble.

And what we are seeing here is that God wants to use that trouble and persecution so that we would be strengthened and persevere in faith until the day that Christ returns.

So let's not be surprised when the persecution comes, when people hate us because we seem to be on the wrong side of many social issues in their eyes.

Let's not be surprised when people start suing us as a church because we stand for the truth of God's Word.

And let's not be surprised when we lose our possessions or our church building when we refuse to compromise that very truth that we know brings us life, life to the full.

But let us remember that God is using these persecutions and sufferings for our progress in faith, so that like Blandina, the slave girl, we can stand firm to the end.

2. God ordains persecution for our joy. (V. 13-14)

But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

Listen to a story of a joy-seeking missionary family. I admit that I got this is from a John Piper sermon, but I think it helps set the tone for the idea of having joy in our sufferings and persecutions.

When Bernie May was the head of Wycliffe Bible Translators he visited a young family in a Muslim nation. They had been there three years working with a people group of 100,000 people and no knowledge of Christ. This couple had three children under five years old.

The baby was covered with pox marks, some of which looked infected. He asked if the child had chicken pox. "No, those are ant bites," the mother said. "We can't keep the ants off him. Eventually he will become immune to them."

Bernie May wrote:

In a moment of honesty she confessed she felt guilty because she was suffering from stress.

***Stress!** She and her young husband came there from mid-USA. Now they live in a place where the temperature is above 100 degrees most of the year. The children are covered with bites; a war is going on close by; their helpers are in danger for being their friends; many in the villages are suffering from hunger and disease; they can't even let their supporters know what they are doing so that they can pray for them since they are in a "critical" area—and she feels guilty because she is under stress.*

*I told her she had every right to feel stressful. I had only been their three days and I was already beginning to come unglued. **Yet this dedicated young couple are laughing and joking and are filled with the joy of the Lord.***

This couple understood that despite their hardships, God ordained this persecution and suffering for their joy. But the question that 1 Peter 4:13-14 force us to ask is, “why is it a joy to suffer for Christ?”

These verses tell us that we rejoice in suffering and persecution because they are a reminder of our **union with Christ** and are a **confirmation of our eternity with Him.**

Jesus says in Matthew 10:22:

“...and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”

So because we are united with Christ and stand for the truth of His Word, the world around us is going to hate us. This is not the world **might** hate us, but the world **will** hate us.

Today, this means that when we, as Christians, stand and fight against things like abortion, gay marriage, pornography, and sex trafficking, and fight for the truth of the gospel; the culture around us will grow more and more hostile toward us to the point where many of us will lose jobs, possessions, and may even end up in jail. **We will be enduring persecution.**

But this should not make us despair, but it should make us rejoice. We rejoice as we are reminded that this suffering and persecution is only happening to us because we are connected to Christ who suffered the same things on our behalf.

As 1 Peter 4:14 says:

If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

The insults and persecution that will come our way will come because people see the Spirit of God in us and they hate it. **They see Jesus in us, and they don't want Him.**

And if the Spirit of God rests upon us, we can also rejoice because we know that we have, a blood bought eternity that is far better than our present circumstances.

This is why verse 13 of 1 Peter 4 says:

But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

We rejoice when we are persecuted, because it is a confirmation that we have been bought through the sufferings and persecution of Christ.

His Spirit lives within us, and that there is an eternity that awaits us where sin, sickness, war, and death shall cease.

So that, like the missionary couple, we can laugh and joke as we are filled with the joy of the Lord.

So God ordains persecution for our progress in faith and for our joy. But there is a warning in this passage and that warning requires us to examine why we are being persecuted in the first place.

3. Being persecuted for being a fool is not Christian persecution. (V. 15)

“But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.”

Now, you might look at this point, and the different categories of people listed in this verse and automatically think, “That’s not me.”

However, before you tune out, Peter's intention here in picking the terms murder, thief, evildoer, and meddler, was not to specifically call out just these particular issues, but was to distinguish between genuine Christian suffering and persecution and the suffering that happens a consequence of misbehavior.

But if you still want to tune this point out, and don't think that it applies to you, listen to Thomas Schreiner's comments on this verse:

“Peter realized that most Christians will not be guilty of obvious sins like murder and stealing, and so he concluded by encouraging believers to even refrain from annoying others. If believers act like busybodies, they would be considered to be pests who deserve ostracism and mistreatment...Peter wanted believers to refrain from acting tactlessly and without social graces.”

Have you ever annoyed someone for doing something foolish? Have you ever acted without tact? Really, have you ever acted like a fool?

I have. In college I got so heated once about a debate over a political issue, **that was of no relevance to the gospel**, that I stormed out of a friend's apartment in anger, to the horror of my wife, because I thought I was so right.

Now these people were still semi-nice to me after that, but they didn't really want to be my friend. I could have concluded that they didn't like me because of my views, but the reality is that I was acting like a fool.

And if we are all honest I think that we can all fall into this category at times.

It might not be heated political debates for you where you storm out of the room, but maybe you post rash or harsh words on social media and people don't respond kindly to that.

Maybe you're the gossip in your friend group or family and people don't tell you things because they are afraid that you will tell other people.

Maybe you're generally the most negative person in the room and people just don't want to be around you.

Maybe you're the one who thinks it is okay to slack off at work which ultimately results in you either being written up or fired.

I could go on and on with examples. But realize that if you are acting like a fool, then you are not being persecuted for Christ, but are receiving the consequences of your ill actions.

As Proverbs 18:6 says:

A fool's lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating.

Again, if you lose friends, or job, or property for being a fool, understand that this is not Christian suffering, but is foolish, self-induced, sin laden suffering.

God will not be honored by it, it will not further the cause of the gospel, and it will not lead to our progress in faith or our joy, but it will only lead to despair and disgrace.

As Proverbs 3:35 says:

The wise will inherit honor, but fools get disgrace

So let's make sure we are suffering and being persecuted for the name of Christ and not because we are being fools.

4. God ordains our suffering to produce glory, not shame. (V. 16)

1 Peter 4:16:

Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.

Up to this point I have been proclaiming and fighting for the idea that God ordains persecution for our progress in faith and for our joy.

And since I have been rallying for these ideas the logical conclusion that some of you might come to is that I am super excited about being persecuted for Christ. **But the reality is that I'm not.**

I confess to you here this morning that I am scared of being persecuted. There are times when the idea of losing family, friends, possessions, and even my tax benefits as a result of standing on the truth of God's Word feels so hard that I want to shrink away so that no one will even know that I am a Christian.

There are times when the idea of being imprisoned or physically harmed for my faith seems so scary that I want to be like Peter and say, **"I swear I am not with Christ. I don't know Him, and I don't believe in Him."**

The reality is that there are times that I live like I am ashamed to be associated with my God and savior all because I am scarred of the possible consequences.

So why am I telling you this? I am telling you this because I know that I need help.

I know that I need to prayers of the saints to be able to stand boldly for the truth of Christ in the face of an ever increasing hostility toward Christianity.

I need the encouragement of the saints to press on toward the goal, which is an everlasting eternity of joy, life, and peace with God even when it is hard.

I need to be reminded that God has ordained this persecution for my good, my joy, my progress in faith, and for His glory. That is why I am telling you that I am scarred.

But I am also telling you this because there is a good chance that you're scarred too. Maybe the thought of losing everything for the cause of Christ is crippling to you so you decide not to ever think about it.

Maybe the thought of persecution makes you too scared to even tell people that you're a Christian. I don't know where you are this morning, but I want you to know that I get it, and I feel your struggle.

But I also want you to know that I don't want to stay where I am. I don't want to be a man that shrinks back when persecution comes.

I don't want to be a man who is ashamed of the gospel, but instead I desire by God's grace to heed the words of 1 Peter 4:16 which say:

"...But let Him glorify God in that name."

My desire is to be a man who walks into persecution and suffering knowing that God has a plan for it.

My desire is to live boldly for Christ knowing that He has good planned for me as He conforms me to His own image.

My desire is to rejoice in the reality that I would be counted worthy to suffer for Christ as I wait for the day when He returns and brings me to my eternal home.

My desire is to be a man who is not ashamed when I am persecuted and suffer, but to be a man who glorifies God.

To be a man who boldly stands for Christ in a way that when He walks me through persecution it will lay a foundation for future gospel ministry like the sufferings of Blandina and the early Christians did in France.

But I'm not there and maybe you're not either. But we can start by realizing that persecution and suffering will come, and that we serve a God who ordains it for our good, our progress, and our joy.

And when we fully start to internalize these realities, we will be able to endure persecution, not as fools, but as Christians. As Christians, who share in the sufferings of Christ who was stricken on our behalf, as Christians who are willing to stand firm on the truth of God's Word, as Christians who glorify God, and as Christian who work for the furthering of God's kingdom.

Remember, this is not our home, but like the believers in 1 Peter, we are exiles who are waiting for an eternity with our Lord that is far greater than any friend, tax break, possession, job, or comfort that this life can offer. **So let's work to be prepared for when the persecution comes. Because it's not if, but when.**

Let's Pray