

Encouragement for Times of Persecution

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 April 2015

Preacher: Jason Webb

[0:00] The last book in our Bibles, Revelation chapter 2, I'll be reading verses 8-11.

! To the angel of the church in Smyrna write,! These are the words of him who is the first and the last, who died and came to life again.

I know your affliction and your poverty, yet you are rich. I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.

Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

[1:18] He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death. Well, Vanya Moiseev was 20 years old when he died for Jesus.

He grew up in the Soviet Union with Christian parents, and they lived together, or they were part of an underground church. And at 16, he was converted. Now, 18, he was drafted for a two-year stint into the Soviet Army.

He wasn't afraid to speak of Jesus Christ to anyone and to everyone that he met. And the officers in charge did everything.

They tried everything they could to silence him, and nothing really worked. And then the KGB came. They showed up and took him away in a chauffeured car, and the torture began.

Day after day, he stood in the frozen wasteland in freezing weather, beatings, starvation, interrogation, and until one day, on accident, they went too far.

[2:44] The day before he died, he was allowed to send his brother a letter. And I find it strange, but the day before he died, he was allowed to send his brother a letter.

And in the letter, it said this, Well, what helped Vanya stay faithful to the end?

What helped him? Well, it was just Jesus' promise, I will give you the crown of life. In the midst of his suffering, in the midst of his persecution, he was looking forward to his reward, and he saw it by faith.

And he did the math. He did the calculations. And he said, These light and momentary troubles are working for me an eternal way of glory.

This is going to be worth it. Now, persecution of every kind is rising all over the world. And it's not your imagination.

[4:05] But we don't need to talk about everywhere. We live here, and so let's talk about here. We aren't called to die yet. We don't have the FBI or the CIA taking us away.

Yet we are called to receive insults and slander and to be lied about and to be thought lowly and beneath people.

I just read this this past week. Born-again Christians are a cancer on our society. That doesn't bode well.

Because what do you do with cancer? Born-again Christians are a cancer on our society. It's not just all Christians. They don't have a problem with Christians in general.

They have a problem with people who would dare say you need to be born again. Again, those kind of Christians are the problem. Bill O'Reilly, two weeks ago, said this.

[5:09] I will say that in certain Christian religions, that if you don't become born again, you go to hell. They preach that. There are a lot of things in a lot of religions that are disturbing. He said that as he was comparing born again, or people who say you need to be born again, to Islamic terrorists.

So Bill O'Reilly says we're disturbing. We're on par with Islamic terrorists. We're a cancer. And that opinion is growing. 50 years ago, no one would have ever said or thought anything like that. But that opinion has now reached the main stream. And that opinion is growing. And persecution is rising. And these are the days that God has called us to live in.

Ecclesiastes warns us about the folly of saying, why can't it be like it used to be? To say that is not wisdom. It's folly. These are the days that God has called us to live in.

These are the situations that God has put us in. And so the question, the all-important question is, is what will see you through to the end? To whatever degree that you will experience persecution, what will see you to the end?

[6:21] How will you stay faithful? That is the important question. Because it hardly matters what you experience here. The all-important question is, is how will you be received at your death?

What will God think of you when your life is over? And Jesus doesn't leave us without help. Without real encouragement. Without honestly looking at the problem and honestly giving us good help.

So that's what we want to look at today. So if you would turn in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 5 and verse 10. Matthew 5 verse 10. Now Jesus in this passage is talking about kingdom life.

Kingdom life. What are the citizens of his kingdom? What are they like? And you see all the beatitudes and there's a lot of them and we're not going to go through all of them.

But then in verse 10, he says this is what the kingdom are. These are what the citizens of God's kingdom are like. This is how you can know if you are in God's kingdom. If you're participating in that.

[7:28] You're living the blessed life. Verse 10. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness. For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven.

For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Now Jesus has three things to tell us about persecution. And the strange thing is, is that each one of them are very good. Very encouraging. He is not speaking to bum us out, to discourage us, to put us in a locked room and say it's all doom and gloom.

He has three good things to say to help us. And the first thing Jesus tells us is that persecution is not a sign that God has abandoned you. That God is against you.

[8:29] That he's against us. The first thing Jesus tells us is that just the opposite is true. Blessed are those who are persecuted. Blessed.

Now that means in favor with God. In favor with God. It's not so much saying that you're happy are those who are persecuted.

He's saying God is on their side. In the biggest sense of things, everything is going their way because God is for them. Blessed.

That's how the Bible uses that word. Psalm 32. Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him. Blessed.

So what happens when your sins are forgiven? Well, you cross over from God being against you, the curse being upon you, to now God being for you.

[9:26] From being angry to being satisfied with you, delighted in you. So to be blessed is for God to be showing you you're living in the favor of God.

God is for you. God's on your side. So Balak, the king, hired Balaam, the false prophet, to curse Israel.

And so that famous scene from Numbers. And so Balaam is overlooking all the tents of Israel. And Balaam has hired him, paid him, to curse Israel.

Now three times he tried. And each time the curse came out a blessing. Each time Balaam meant to curse him, and out of his mouth came blessing.

And Balaam is all frustrated. I didn't pay you for this. I paid you for a curse. Why are you blessing him? And Balaam says, how can I curse those God has blessed? If God is for these people, then what can I do to curse them?

[10:30] So how can I bring ill on them when God wants to do them good? When God is for them. That's what it means to be blessed. God is for you. So is the world against us? Yes.

Yes. Is the world against us? Is the tide of public opinion against us? Yes. Are we insulted? Slandered?

Does the world misunderstand us and hate us? Jesus says, God is for you. God is for you. The world is against you.

But don't think for a moment that means that God is not for you. The world's disfavor is no sign of God's disfavor. The exact opposite of truth is true. God is for you. And so persecution, this is the natural thing that you want to think, that persecution is a sign of abandonment.

But Jesus is saying, no, in fact, the exact opposite is true. It's a sign of belonging. It's a sign of belonging. It's not a sign of God's anger. It's a sign of his love. It's not a sign of your worthlessness. [11:33] That's what the world wants to say. It's a sign of your value. You're worthy. You're counted worthy. So the Sanhedrin, in Acts, they flog the disciples.

Wit. So the blood is dripping down their back, searing, burning pain. A flogging. And the apostles left the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name.

The world says, worthless. Garbage. No account. No account. And God says, worthy. And the apostles rejoice.

Because they are thinking of what God has to think of them. Not what the world has to think of them. So persecution is no sign that God has abandoned us. It's a sign that we are his. He loves us. He's for us.

We're on his side. And so don't lose heart. The easiest thing to do is look around and lose heart. To look around at all the people that are against us. Hear those things.

[12:40] And then forget what God actually thinks about us. Jesus said, if they persecuted me, they will persecute you. So how do you know you are with Jesus?

You're with the King of glory. You are going to ride with him when he comes out of heaven on a white horse, stomping the nations. How do you know that you're going to be in that fair army?

Well, now you are persecuted. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you. So you have a cross just like him. You are insulted just like he was. You are lied about and slandered just like he was.

You are hurt and reviled and insulted just like him. And if you are with him, you are going to receive the same treatment from the world. It doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense at all.

But their irrational hatred of Jesus is going to spill over into their irrational hatred of you. Jesus has told us that. And so the point is, is don't lose heart. That says that you are with Jesus.

[13:45] So persecution is a seal. It's a stamp. So you go to the court or you go to a notary public and they stamp it as this is an official document. Persecution is a seal where God says, this one's with me.

This one is mine. I am for them. The world is against them. I am for them. So every lie against us, every lie against you is confirming that Hebrews 11:38 is true about you.

The world was not worthy of them. So how do you know the world isn't worthy of you? It's below you.

They persecute you. So Jesus says, take heart. Second thing Jesus wants to tell us is that persecution is something that we experience for him.

Persecution is something that we experience for him. Jesus says, blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

[14:52] Because of me. Jesus joins persecution to himself. He does that, doesn't he? He takes persecution personally to himself.

And he says, when we are persecuted, we are doing it for him. So why will we suffer? For his sake. For his sake. For him. So to be faithful to Jesus is going to mean a cross.

It's going to mean death to some degree or other. Jesus wasn't joking when he says, come, take up your cross and follow me.

Now, that doesn't mean take up your trial. It doesn't mean take up the hard things in your life. Those are definitely a part of your Christian life.

If you're going to be faithful, you're going to have to endure through all sorts of difficulties. But a cross, the cross was the instrument that the world used to kill Jesus.

[15:55] It was the instrument of death for Jesus. And so Jesus says, you want to follow me? Get ready for the world to hate you.

Get ready for the world to lie against you and kill you just like they did me. Now, if we follow Jesus, we walk into persecution. And my point here, though, is that if we walk into persecution, we do it following Jesus.

We do it because we love him. We do it because these are the steps that he walked. And now we're following him because we love him. So we do it in love for him. And so enduring persecution, enduring slander and lies for Jesus' sake is not divorced from our relationship with Jesus.

Suffering persecution is not unrelated to our love for Jesus. And so we suffer because of him, for him. We suffer because we love him. And so we're the faithful bride who follows her husband even though he goes into prison.

Richard Baxter, the Puritan, in the 17th century, the 1600s, was thrown into prison for at least a year and a half for preaching.

[17:17] And how about this? He had a young, beautiful wife. It's a great story how they met. He played hard to get for a long time and she kept following him.

And eventually they fell in love. Anyways, he had a young, beautiful wife. And his young, beautiful wife followed him into the stinking prison and set up home there.

He's going there? Now that's where my house is. And so she lived with him. And he suffered and she said, I'm going with you. I'm suffering for you.

And so dear brothers and sisters, when we are persecuted, don't miss this. Don't miss the sweetness of this. That will you do it in love for Jesus.

So Peter abandoned Jesus on that dark, dark Friday. Remember? He left Jesus. He ran. He stayed away. He denied him. But, you know, that wasn't the end of Peter's story.

[18:19] Years later, tradition tells us that love for Jesus took Peter to a cross. And when he knew he was going to be crucified, he begged to be crucified upside down because he was not worthy to die like his Lord.

And so the nails went into his wrists. And the nails went into his ankles. And every bit of it was a love letter from Peter to Jesus.

I'm with you. I love you. I'm going where you're going. Jesus did this for me. I will do this for him. Do you think Peter regrets his love letter to Jesus now?

Paul's love for Jesus took him to the chopping block. John was exiled to Patmos for Jesus' sake. Persecution is about love for Jesus.

About faithfulness. And I think that puts persecution in a new light. I think that puts it in a very good light, even. That takes persecution from something that we merely endure into something that is now saying to Jesus, I love you.

[19:42] I love you. I love you. And remember, that's exactly how Jesus receives it. And so we're on the road to Damascus.

And there's Saul of Tarsus breathing out threats and all that. And Jesus stops him and says, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? Jesus took the persecution to himself.

Jesus took it very personally. And so we say, I love you, Jesus. And Jesus says, I know. Now the third point, and the main point of what Jesus has to say about persecution in verses 11 and 12 is this.

Persecution is not only something that we do that shows us that we belong to the kingdom of God. It's not only something that we do for Jesus because we love him, and it's a way that we can write a love letter to him.

Persecution brings a great reward. A great reward. So why, Jesus, why are we so blessed when we are persecuted?

[20:49] And he says, because great is your reward in heaven. Great is your reward in heaven. What will keep us in the way? Thinking of that reward. Why do we need to look at heaven?

Why do we need to understand what is awaiting us? Because that's going to keep us faithful in this dark valley. So what kept Vanya in the way? It was the reward. He was looking at the crown of life. Now let me ask you, is it wrong to want a reward? Not at all. Sometimes I think we are trying to be more spiritual than God. Again and again, you can read the Sermon on the Mount, and Jesus says, you know why you should go into your room and pray in secret?

Because that's the only way that God will reward you. He's saying, you'd be nuts to pray in public because you don't get anything from God that way. Go into your room and pray in secret, and your Father who sees what's done in secret will reward you.

Same thing with fasting. Again and again, the Bible says reward. Read Revelation. We read one of those seven letters. At the end of each letter, or each letter Jesus writes to one of those churches, there's a promise.

[22:02] It says, to those who overcome, I will do this. And it's a reward. Jesus is saying, you're going to go through all sorts of experiences. There's all things against you, all sorts of things against you, your own heart's against you, the world's against you, everything like that.

But here's what happens if you overcome. You get this great reward. So is it wrong to want a reward? No. Not at all. God knows how we're made.

We were meant to want to do something for a reward. Sometimes God says, do this because it's right. But God is so good that he always puts a reward on the obedience.

Yes, it's the right thing to do. But God always says, and if you do it, you'll be blessed. He says, do it because there's a reward for it. Now, this reward for persecution, it's not a trophy for participation. It's not just something that, well, you automatically get for playing on the team. It's a reward connected to the suffering of the persecution.

[23:10] It's a reward for those who endure. See, a trophy for participation is not going to make you play any harder, is it? But if you only get a trophy if you win, then you're going to play harder.

And if you are only going to get a reward if you really do endure, then you're going to endure. So what is this reward? What is it?

Well, I don't know exactly. But this is what I, we can say at least two things about it. Okay? Two things. One, the first, is that it will be the exact opposite of what the world gave the Christian.

It will be the exact opposite of what the world gave the Christian. So Jesus said to the church in Smyrna in Revelation 2, we read it, Stay faithful to death, and I will give you the crown of life.

The world is going to give you death, and I am going to give you life. But not just any ordinary life, the crown of life. The highest, the greatest kind of life you can imagine. A quality of life that is beyond your wildest imaginations and dreams.

[24:19] You stay faithful, they'll kill you, and I will totally reverse that and give you the great crown of life. So think about that. It's the exact opposite of what the world is going to give you.

This is fertile ground for meditation. They insult you. They run you down. They ignore you. They slander you.

They leave you. They say terrible things about you. Whatever form that persecution takes, they do that. So they insult you. They run you down.

Now what does God do? He's going to do the exact opposite. The world has had their say. Now it's God's turn to have his say. They run you down, and God will lift you up.

They had terrible things to say about you. Now God has wonderful things to say about you. And what will God say? Can you imagine it?

[25:25] He stops. He stops heaven. And he makes all of heaven and all the heavenly hosts look at you and say, This is my servant.

With him I am well pleased. And all eyes are on you. And their esteem of you is lifted up because of what he said. The world called him trash.

But he's a jewel among men. He's one of the greatest of men. Honor him for all the insults he bore for my sake.

The Christians in the book of Hebrews had their stuff taken from them. They lost their possessions. Their hard-earned possessions. And that's hard. We don't like to work for nothing.

We don't like to work for people to steal it from us. And that's what they endured for Jesus Christ's sake. But now they are going to get the exact opposite of what the world gave them. The world took their possessions.

[26:25] And you know why they did that? They allowed that because they knew they had eternal possessions. So what will Jesus do? He looks and he says, the bank account was emptied.

They were robbed. They had their goods stolen from him. He must be rewarded. And he's not just going to fill up the bank account.

He's going to give you the heavens and the earth. Eternal possessions. The universe is a big place. There's a lot of things to give. Whole planets. He could give you a cattle on a thousand hills. I don't know. But this is the point.

Every dollar you lost, Jesus will return to you with such interest that your jaw will drop. And you will say, but Lord, it was just a little money.

[27:24] It was just a little bit. And every lie against you, God will vindicate you. And he will proclaim your faithfulness. Your beauty. Your worth.

To make up for all the evil they said about you. That's what Jesus was talking about when he said, if you're ashamed of me, I'll be ashamed of you before God and the angels.

But if you acknowledge me before men, I will acknowledge you before God and the angels. You speak well of me. And I will speak well of you.

Can you imagine Jesus having a good word to say about you? But he does. I'll speak well of you before God and all the angels in heaven.

So Jesus says, rejoice and be glad. For great is your reward in heaven. So a little bit of suffering.

[28:30] Light and momentary suffering. Eternal weight of glory. God, he's not messing around. He's not giving a little for a little. He's giving a little. You give a little, he gives a lot.

Eternal rewards. Now, he says rejoice and be glad. So imagine, imagine the reward that some of our brothers and sisters who have gone before are going to receive.

It makes me so glad to imagine that. To think of people who have suffered and now they come into the presence of God and God is giving out rewards to them. And you're like, yes, yes.

This is so wonderful. So imagine the reward for Blandina. Blandina was a slave teenage girl. Can you, you know, imagine her?

A slave in Rome. A teenager. A girl. A girl. She, she, she's the lowest of the lowest of the lowest.

And for some reason they took their, they hated her for her faith.

[29:36] They took her to an arena in Lyon. It was in Gaul, which is now France. And she was tortured for her faith. Before they threw her into the arena, they tortured her.

They tortured her to exhaustion. Not her exhaustion. Her torture is exhaustion. And she was finally sewn into a bag and thrown to a wild stag.

And when she was still living after that, at long last, they, they stabbed her to death. And Jesus looks and says, rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven.

So what will Blandina's reward be like? Can you imagine what Jesus is going to do for her? In love, she stayed faithful.

In love, she refused to deny Jesus. We don't know what the reward will be, but we do know it will be the exact opposite of what the world gave her. And then we, second thing we know, it will be according to Jesus' loving heart.

[30:53] It will correspond to how big and how kind and how loving and powerful and gracious and glorious Jesus' heart is. So the world hated her.

And they did their best to make her suffer. And now it's Jesus' turn. And Jesus loves her. And it's now his turn to do his best. So how great is the reward?

How great is the reward for persecution? It's as great as Jesus' loving, huge, God-sized heart. It will be as great as Jesus can think or imagine or bestow.

So the world gave her all they could imagine. The worst they could do. And now it's Jesus' turn. And he created the heavens. His understanding no one can fathom.

And now his infinite mind is not bent on creating. Now it's bent on Blandina to do her good.

[31:59] And his love. His love took him to a bloody cross. His love took him into the anger of his father. His love took him into the nightmare of God's wrath for her.

And now his infinite mind and his infinite love are now turned on Blandina to reward her for her faithfulness. Great is your reward in heaven.

So what will it be? I don't know. But we will all see it. And all the saints will honor her.

And all the angels will honor her. And Jesus himself will honor her. And the honor won't stop at her.

Our honor will turn from her and turn to God and say, Oh, great God.

How glorious. How kind. How generous you are. What a king. What a God. See, for a king to share his honor.

[33:06] For a king to share his reward. To reward his servants. It does not belittle the king. It magnifies the king. It makes everyone say, What a king. How glorious.

And so imagine it. You're going to be seeing men and women. Faithful Isaiah. Isaiah. He was probably sawn in two.

Zachariah. The prophet was cut down in the temple. Abel was killed by his brother, Jim Elliot. The hundreds of Christian missionaries who were cut down. And won't you rejoice to see them rewarded?

Rewarded. But it's not. And when you see them rewarded, won't you? Won't your heart soar in love for Jesus that he would do such a thing? That he would be so kind?

But not just them. But ordinary moms and dads. Ordinary moms and dads whose children turned away from them.

[34 : 09] And ignored them. Ordinary moms and dads whose children turned them into authorities. And children who were devastated when their parents turned them in.

And now Jesus himself saying, Well done. And putting crowns of glory on their head. And saying, Sit here with me. And reign forever.

It will all redound. It will all echo and shine for his glory. That he should reward so much for so little. The suffering was so light and momentary.

And the rewards are forever. So, what will get us through this evil day? What will make us rejoice and be glad even in persecution? In insult and robbery and betrayal.

Jesus says, Look at your great reward in heaven and rejoice and be glad. Look and take heart. Be encouraged. Rejoice it even in this.

[35 : 14] Now my dear lost friend. This is the glory of being a Christian. This is the great thing about being a Christian. I say this all the time.

The best thing in the whole world is to be a Christian. God is for us. You know what that's like? God is for us.

Our very worst things, he turns into our best things. Every insult gets turned into a crown. Every lie gets turned into honor. Our death, he turns into light.

Insult into blessing. Hurt into pleasure. Every lie, a crown on our heads. God is for us. God is for us. And so he takes all the sinfulness and all the wickedness that men do against us and he just transforms it and repackages us.

And when we receive it, finally, it looks like glory. But what about you? Is that true of you? If you're outside of Christ, is that true of you?

[36 : 14] The answer is no. No. The truth is, every single one of your best things, God will turn into your worst things. Every single one of your blessings, he will turn into a curse.

God is against you. God opposes you. And the only reason he opposes you is because of your sin. It's only your sin.

But he gives a savior for sinners. And even now he says, lay down your arms. You need a savior. Here is my son. He can save you. He can save you. Give yourself to him and he'll give himself to you. Repent. Turn against your sin. So sin is the wind in your sails.

You go exactly where it wants. Now it's time to turn against your sin and fight against your sin. Turn against your sin and turn to me. Believe. Trust in me. Trust that I am this good and you will live.

[37 : 21] Now, it's time for the test. Can I tell you, if you don't do it, if you don't turn to God, if you don't repent, you'll lose everything.

You will lose everything. Because you can't keep it. You can't keep this world.

You can't keep things of this world. You can't keep this world's good opinion of you. You can't keep your money. If you fight against God, he will undo you.

He will fight against you and you will lose it all. Because God is not messing around. He's playing for keeps. And so it's time to think.

Because you are all going to die. We are all going to die. And we are all going to be confronted with the choices that we made during this life.

[38 : 26] And so it's time to think. It's time to do the calculations. And so teenager, it's time to think. Woman, it's time to think. Man, it's time to think. You can't keep it.

And God is offering you everything. So think. The world is a very noisy, busy place.

Because noisy, busy people don't think about what's going to happen. So think. Jim Elliot died with spears sticking out of his body.

27 years old. Murdered by the very ones he was trying to befriend. He lost everything the world has to offer. But you know, that's not unusual.

Everyone loses everything. He lost everything the world has to offer. He lost his family. He lost his wife. He lost Valerie, his little toddler.

[39 : 41] He lost his future. He lost his plans. He lost everything the world could give him. But seven years earlier, he had done the calculations.

He had done the math. And he said, he is no fool to give up what he cannot keep. To gain what he cannot lose.

He lost it all. And yet, what did he gain? It's beyond even saying. It's as great as Jesus' heart.

It's as great as Jesus' mind. It's as great as God. And so the moment he shut his eyes in death, he opened his eyes to Jesus. And he opened his eyes to a great reward. And not just life. The crown of life. Not just reward. The greatest reward God himself can imagine and give.

[40:47] So what about you? What are you living for? Is it worth dying for? Because if it's not worth dying for, it's not really worth living for either.

Is it worth dying for? Jesus is. He is. Let's pray. Oh great God, it's amazing that you would even notice people like us.

You have thousands upon thousands of angels to worship you. The sons of men. The kingdoms of men.

The might. The money. Everything of this world is so beneath you. The heavens themselves are so below you. And so it's amazing that you would even stoop to us.

But it is even more amazing that you would promise a reward for loving you and staying faithful to you and suffering persecution for you.

[41:54] That's too good for us. It's too much for us. We are unworthy servants. We've only done our duty.

And yet so often we haven't even done that. Thank you. Thank you. For Jesus. Thank you for salvation. Thank you that right now anyone here, your arms are open and you are receiving sinners to save them and give them a life now that is significant, that is meaningful, that will last even through death.

And into eternal life. I pray that you would put before us the seriousness of this life, the seriousness of our coming death, the seriousness of judgment.

Will you create enough space and quiet and time in our lives so that we could think. Holy Spirit, help us to think about what you have said to us.

To let it weigh upon our hearts and to let it change our priorities. To take away fear and give us courage. To take away sullenness and depression and despair and replace it with joy.

[43:14] Even joy unspeakable because of what Jesus has done for us and what he has promised to us. We hope these words of his to echo into our hearts and do their work in our lives.

Pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen.