

September 29th, 2019

The Persecution of an Experimental Christian

Psalm 119:81-88

What is experimental Christianity?

If you are new to our series we have been dealing with what the Puritans called Experimental Christianity. Calvin used the term experimental interchangeably with experiential. Because he believed “that Christianity should not only be known and understood, and believed, but also felt, and enjoyed, and practically applied.”¹ In other words, experimental or experiential Christianity is concerned with the whole life of the Christian.

Experimental Christianity in Psalm 119

Now Psalm 119 likewise deals with the whole life of the Christian. As we have said before, Psalm 119 is like the diary of the Christian life. Each eight-verse section deals with a different theme, or a different experience that all Christians face. If we put them altogether we get a composite picture of what a Christian looks like. As one author has said “The Christian is a difficult man to describe, and undoubtedly the best way of doing so is to depict the various qualities that he manifests.”² That’s what Psalm 119 does. It’s like the Beatitudes of the OT.

The Persecution of an Experimental Christian

Now last week we saw the relationship that the Christian has with the church. This week we see the relationship that the Christian has with everyone else. Whereas the Christian finds all his joy and strength in the rest of God’s

¹ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality: A Practical Theological Study from our Reformed and Puritan Heritage*, (Webster, NY.,: Evangelical Press, 2006), pg. 425-426

² Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Eerdmans Publishing, 1976), pg. 119

people—the Church; he finds his greatest heartache, his greatest trouble, with everyone else. You see the gospel of Jesus Christ divides all of the universe. It makes “a clear-cut division and distinction between the Christian and the non-Christian.”³ The Christian is unlike any other man or woman on planet earth. He has been born from above. He is a temple of the Holy Spirit. He has become a partaker of the Divine nature. He is altogether a new creation. The Christian is a constant reminder to all the universe that God is holy, sin is wicked, and that judgment coming. How does the universe respond to this? With persecution.

I was in D.C. two weeks ago and met some precious Chinese brothers who were part of the underground church. When they returned to China, they were fairly certain they would be arrested, detained and interrogated. Why? Because the greatest threat to communist China is not bombs and bullets, but Christians. The same thing is true for wherever you call home. Christians are not just the light of China, they are the light of the world. And what does light do? It exposes the darkness. And when the darkness is exposed, it fights back in order to stay secret, in order to stay safe. And if right at this point you’re thinking, “Well I’ve never been persecuted, I never faced opposition from the world” then I would answer by saying that one of two things are true of you. 1) You’re a nominal Christian—Christian by name only. 2) You’re under-defining persecution. All Christians are persecuted to one degree or another. **2 Timothy 3:12** says “*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*” Yes this persecution may look vastly different depending on where and when you live. But you will be persecuted none-the-less. Therefore, what the Psalmist is going to teach us about persecution and how to deal with it is the most relevant and vital thing that you could possibly hear this week.

³ *ibid*, pg. 120

- ☆What Is Persecution?
- ☆Why Are Christians Persecuted?
- ☆How Do We Endure Persecution?

The Big Idea...

The Christian life is a life of persecution, but take heart this is a sure sign of belonging to the kingdom of heaven

I. What is Persecution?

Ad fontes⁴

First I hope that you can see this theme plainly from our passage. It's clear that the Psalmist is in distress. He asks at the end of **v.82** "When will you comfort me?" Why does he need comfort? Because of persecution.

v.84 "When will you judge those who *persecute* me?"

v.85 "The insolent have dug pitfalls for me"

v.86 "They *persecute* me with falsehood; help me!"

v.87 "They have almost made an end of me on the earth"

So this isn't generalized affliction like what we saw in **v.65-72**. No this type of affliction is specifically persecution.

What is persecution?

So then what is persecution? What does it mean? Persecution is harassment. It always involves one person or one group of persons who are harassing, vexing, or afflicting another person or group of persons. More

⁴ Latin meaning "Back to the sources"

specifically, persecution is the harassing of others *because* of what they believe concerning God, sin and salvation. Which makes persecution a very peculiar type of suffering. Why do I say that? Because persecution is the only type of suffering that you volunteer for. You don't volunteer for cancer or for autoimmune diseases. You don't volunteer to be handicapped. But persecution—out of every type of suffering you could possibly face—you face precisely you have become a Christian. “A Christian is persecuted because he is a certain type of person and because he behaves in a certain manner.”⁵

Why does persecution exist?

And that helps us to see *why* persecution exists. Persecution exists for one reason—to destroy the faith of Christians. Look at **v.81** “My soul *longs* for your salvation...” **v.82** “My eyes *long* for your promise...” That word *long* in both places means “be spent” or “be consumed” or “fail.” I think the ESV does injustice to the agony the Psalmist is feeling here. The KJV translates **v.81** as saying “My soul *faints* for thy salvation.” The NLT puts it this way “I am *worn out* waiting for your rescue.” The NASB says “My soul *languishes* for Your salvation.” He's not just pining for God's salvation, he's at his wits end. His soul is spent, he feels consumed, he feels as though his faith is going to fail. That's what persecution is aimed at—destroying your faith. Some people have the idea in their heads that persecution is *aimed* at bodily harm. No. It's aimed at crushing your soul. Bodily harm may be thrown in. But the aim of persecution dear believer is to separate you from your trust in Christ.⁶

Who are our persecutors?

Who does this text tell us our persecutors are? The most specific description we have comes in **v.85**, he calls them “the insolent,” meaning the

⁵ “This is what is going to happen to you if you are a Christian.” Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1976), pg. 110

⁶ Someone may object: “I'm a Christian, and no amount of persecution can destroy my faith in Jesus Christ.” That is true objectively (1 Peter 1:5) but you can lose your assurance (2 Peter 1:10). And I would say that assurance of salvation is the most precious gift a believer has. A Christian who has lost their assurance is a most miserable Christian indeed (WCF 18:4)

proud or arrogant ones. Well ask yourself: who are the proud ones in Scripture? All who oppose God. Therefore we can see that there are three groups that persecute the Christian: 1) the world; 2) the church; and 3) Satan

1. The Christian is persecuted by the world

Jesus said in **John 15:19** “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, *therefore the world hates you.*” This point needs no proof. Even secular news sites will own up this fact. The BBC reported on May 3 of this year that Christians are the most persecuted group in the world.⁷

2. The Christian is persecuted by the church

Some of the greatest persecutions that the Christian has had to endure have come from the church itself. I don't at all mean the true church, I mean the nominal church, those who are posing as the people of God. Moses was persecuted by the people of Israel in the wilderness. David was persecuted by Saul who was the king of Israel. Then just consider the OT prophets. Think of Elijah and Jeremiah and the other prophets. Who persecuted them? Not the Philistines, but Israel herself—the people of God. Stephen said to the Jews in **Acts 7:52** “Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?” Then think of the NT. Who was Jesus greatest adversaries? It was the Pharisees and the scribes—those who were most immersed in religion. Likewise when the apostles became his witnesses in the book of Acts, it was the religious Jews who brought the most persecution against them. Then consider the history of the Christian church. Who killed the martyrs? Was it not the Roman Catholic church? Who pushed the Puritans out of England? It is always nominal Christianity that is often the greatest enemy of the faith once delivered. We see the same thing happening in our own day. Some of the fiercest opposition that we face in the so-called sexual revolution are from those who claim to follow Jesus.

⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-48146305>

3. The Christian is persecuted by Satan

No matter when or where you live, every Christian will be persecuted by the devil and his demons. This is clear if we just consider the names that Scripture gives him: he is *the enemy* (**Matthew 13:39**); *the tempter* (**Matthew 4:3**); and *the adversary* (**1 Peter 5:8**).

It is clear that Satan persecutes Christians if we just consider his works:

- Satan *schemes* against us. **Ephesians 6:11** “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against *the schemes of the devil*” (cf. **2 Cor. 2:11**).
- Satan will try to *lead our thoughts away from Christ*. **2 Corinthians 11:3** “But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.”
- Satan is one who *devours*. **1 Peter 5:8** “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”

And then we have have specific evidence from Scripture. Even though God gave him permission, it was Satan’s hand that afflicted Job (**Job 1:12; 2:6**) Likewise, though God had a purpose in Paul’s thorn, it was nonetheless “a messenger of Satan” sent to harass him (**2 Cor. 12:7**).

So then we must ask: what does this persecution from Satan look like? I would suggest that it most often takes the form of how Jesus was tempted by the devil in Matthew 4. Do you remember how Satan approached Jesus? “*If you are the Son of God...*” Satan tempted persecuted Him by calling into question his identity: ‘If you really are who you say you are...then...’

Oh dear saint that is how Satan so often will persecute you:⁸ ‘If you really were a Christian, then you would be doing more, loving more, sacrificing more.

⁸ — by interjecting sinful thoughts into our minds. This is what I believe Paul means in **Ephesians 6:16** when he says “In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish *all the flaming darts of the evil one*.” Those flaming darts *clearly* are not physical, but spiritual, just as Satan is not physical but spiritual. Where then do these flaming darts land? In our spirits, in the form of interjecting thoughts. And the devil’s greatest trick is to convince you that they proceeded from your own heart. I’m certainly not saying that all sinful thoughts come from Satan. No clearly not, but a great deal do. See Wilhemus A Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service, Vol. 4: Ethics and Eschatology*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Reformation Heritage Books, 1995) pg. 242-246

True Christians are holy and loving. Have you not deceived yourself?⁹ Or maybe he'll say it more negatively: If you really were a Christian, then you wouldn't be doing the things you are doing. Real Christians don't sin like you do. Your faith is not real, You will fall away.'

Dear believer, this is why I said earlier that if you are a true believer but don't think you've faced persecution, you are simply under-defining what shape persecution takes. Where do you think your anxieties about your inadequacies come from? They are the fiery darts sent from the evil one that Paul speaks about in Ephesians 6. Where do you think those thoughts come from that God doesn't really love you? Where do those thoughts of condemnation come from that damn you in your own head? They come from Satan. I would argue that he is our chief persecutor. He is the accuser of the brethren (**Rev. 12:10**). It is not flesh and blood that we wrestle against, but the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (**Eph. 6:12**).¹⁰

Nonetheless, those are the three forces that persecute the Christian: the world, the nominal church, and Satan. Those are the insolent ones in **v.85**.

What does persecution feel like?

The Psalmist doesn't leave us at the theoretical level. He tells us what this persecution feels like. He gives us three pieces of imagery. First he says in **v.83** that this persecution has made him feel "like a wineskin in the smoke." The wineskins of the ancient East were animal skins. And they had to be careful where they chose to hang these skins. Because if the wineskin was left too close to the fire, it would wrinkle and would blacken. It would be ruined, and therefore discarded. The Psalmist is saying he feels like he is ruined by this persecution and that God has discarded him.

The second piece of imagery is in **v.85** "The insolent have dug pitfalls for me." A pitfall was a hole that hunters would dig and carefully conceal so that an animal would fall into it. In some of these pits, they would put spikes so that the

⁹ *ibid*, pg. 238

¹⁰ Book recommendation: Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices by Puritan Thomas Brooks

fall would impale the beast. But notice, the Psalmist says pitfalls—plural—there many such treacherous holes around him. And they are all concealed—hidden. Where do you place your feet if the ground looks the same? The Psalmist is saying that there’s no place where he can walk that he won’t fall into persecution.

The third piece of imagery is in v.87 “They have almost made an end of me on earth.” Now this can either be understood either spiritually or physically. Either ‘they have persecuted me almost to the point of apostasy’ or ‘they have persecuted me almost to the point of death itself.’ I think it’s the spiritual meaning, because the aim of persecution is not pain. The aim is to get us to renounce our faith. So the Psalmist is saying the persecution is so fierce that he felt as though he could give up on his faith altogether.

The dissonance of persecution

What I want you to notice here is that this section has no resolve. It doesn’t end on a happy note like all the sections we have seen so far. It ends in dissonance. Like when a composer finishes her song on a note that makes you feel uneasy. You want to walk over to the piano and play the major chord that the song should end on. But that doesn’t happen here. Why? Because the Christian will never stop being persecuted this side of glory.¹¹ That’s one of the marks of a Christian. God promised enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent,¹² and that promise will last until the end of this age. The Psalmist is going to help us face persecution—not by showing us how to escape it—that’s impossible, but by showing us how to thrive in it. That’s our **first point**. Persecution is what every Christian faces from the moment he is born from above, until he makes it to heaven’s shores.

¹¹ That’s why we see three hanging questions in this section: v.82—“When will you comfort me?”; v.84a—“How long must your servant endure?”; v.84b—“When will you judge those who persecute me?”

¹² Genesis 3:15

II. Why Are Christians Persecuted?

Because they are Christians

The most general reason Christians are persecuted is *simply because* they are Christians. **Galatians 4:29** says “But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, *so also it is now.*” Jesus said “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you” (**John 15:18**).

Not because we are foolishness

But we need to give a couple important qualifications. You see *not all* persecution that might come to a particular Christian isn't because he is doing Christian things. First of all, we can be persecuted because we are being foolish. We in the Reformed camp can step into this so often. It's called the cage-stage. We come into Calvinism for the first time and we are so excited about the truths that we are experiencing and rightly so. But then before we learn how to apply the grace we've been shown to others, we go out like MMA fighters trying to put Arminians into holy headlocks. If we are 'persecuted' for doing that, we deserve it. That's just foolishness. Of course it's not limited to this example. We can be persecuted for any number of foolish things that we do. Being persecuted for foolishness is not Christian persecution.

Not because we are fanatical

Secondly we can be persecuted because we are fanatical. During the days of Jesus there were a group of rebels called the zealots. The zealots “sought to incite the people of Judea Province to rebel against the Roman Empire and expel it from the Holy Land by force of arms.”¹³ The zealots were hunted down by the Romans and many of them were crucified. They were fanatical. Not because they went to war *per se*. There are times that war is right, even for Christians. **Ecclesiastes 3:8** says there is “a time for war, and a time for peace.”

¹³ Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zealots> Accessed September 28, 2019

No they were fanatical because they had dismissed Jesus. They thought the kingdom was in physical Jerusalem, but Jesus preached that the kingdom came through Him. Because they rejected the gospel, they became fanatical, and were thus persecuted for it. Peter speaks about this type of persecution. **1 Peter 4:14-15** “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.” Being persecuted for fanaticism is not Christian persecution.¹⁴

Persecuted for righteousness’ sake

So then, what is the specific reason that Christians are persecuted? Let’s look to our passage. **v.83** “For I have become like a wineskin in the smoke, *yet I have not forgotten your statutes*”; and then again in **v.87** “They have almost made an end of me on earth, *but I have not forsaken your precepts.*” Do you see? He is ordering *what he thinks* and *what he does* according to God’s word. In other words, he’s being persecuted for righteousness’ sake.¹⁵

Righteousness ≠ moral goodness

Now let’s make something clear here—being righteous is different from simply being morally good. The world, generally speaking, will not persecute you for being *good*. If you watch the news at night, there is generally a story at the end the broadcast of some person who has done their community good in some way, and the world praises them for such actions. “There are people who have made great sacrifices, those who have given up careers, prospects and wealth and who sometimes have even sacrificed their lives; and the world has thought of them as great heroes and has praised them.”¹⁶ You see that type of

¹⁴ Much help here from Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Eerdmans Publishing, 1976), pg. 112-113. He had a third category, namely that it is not Christian persecution when one is persecuted for a cause (that is, the mixing of our religion and politics). But I felt that I was unable to intelligently parse that one out at this time.

¹⁵ This is the last beatitude that Jesus gives in **Matthew 5:10** “Blessed are those who are persecuted *for righteousness’ sake...*”

¹⁶ *ibid*, pg. 114-115

goodness, which we will admit is in fact good in a certain sense, is not the same thing as righteousness. When the world praises those people, they are actually praising themselves. They see in those acts of goodness their best selves. They admire that goodness because it is something they believe they themselves can attain to, or that they already are. To make this difference so clear, consider the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He did many good things—He healed the sick, He fed the hungry, He gave sight to the blind. He wasn't persecuted because He did these good things. No, He was persecuted because He was righteous.

Righteousness = living to please the Lord

What does that mean? It means that He was controlled and dominated by God's will, by God's word. He said in **John 6:38** "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me." That's what the Psalmist is getting at in **v.83** and **v.87**. A Christian is one who has been fundamentally changed. As Peter says it "Once you were not a people, but now you are are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (**1 Peter 4:10**). Why were we made God's people? So that we "may proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light" (**1 Peter 4:9**). This is what makes the Christian different than everyone else.

The Christian above all else desires to live for Jesus Christ, to please Him and bring glory to his name.

And if you say, "Pastor Josh, I fail at this all the time. I am a great sinner and oh how it grieves me. I don't think I can say that my desire is to live for Jesus Christ." I would simply say this "your grief over your sin is no different than the Apostle Paul's. He said "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (**Romans 7:15**). Furthermore your grief is proof that your greatest desire is to please Jesus Christ. Do you not grieve because you have not lived as you

ought, you have not lived to please Jesus? The non-Christian never grieves like this. He never grieves about how his sin disrupts his relationship with Jesus.

The Christian is a reminder of another world

You see, the fundamental impulse of a Christian's life is so radically different than the non-Christian. The Christian repents for his sin. The Christian goes to Jesus for fresh cleansing. The Christian goes to the Word for his food, for his wisdom, for his joy. The Christian says: "I am not my own, I have been bought with a price."¹⁷ That is why the Christian is persecuted. The Christian is a reminder to everyone who sees him that there is another world. The non-Christian lives his life doing everything that he can to not think of the next world. That's why there's a billion different things that the world invents to distract us from reality. As Lloyd-Jones says "It is just a great conspiracy and effort to stop thinking, and especially to avoid thinking of death and the world to come. That is typical of the non-Christian; there is nothing that he hates so much as talking about death and eternity."¹⁸ The Christian, simply for being a Christian, is the unmovable reminder to the whole world that there is a God, that He is holy, and that He punishes sin.¹⁹ That's our **second point**. The Christian is persecuted because his words and deeds point to a holy God that will one day come to judge the living and the dead.

III. How Do We Endure Persecution?

The most important question

This is perhaps the most important question that we face as Christians. If persecution is aimed at destroying our faith, and if persecution can cause our

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

¹⁸ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1976), pg. 121

¹⁹ The Christian can do this without words—1 Peter 4:4; or with words—Acts 24:24-25

very souls to faint and fail, and if persecution lasts our whole life, then how will we endure it? The Psalmist gives us three answers.

1. We endure persecution by hoping in His Word

This is the first thing the Psalmist says. **v.81** “My soul longs for your salvation; *I hope in your word.*” God’s word tells us specifically what to think about persecution. Jesus put it like this in **Matthew 5:10** “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” Two remarkable things that Jesus says. **First** He says, that if you are persecuted for righteousness’ sake you are blessed—meaning you should rejoice. That seems completely backward. Why should you rejoice if others harass you and afflict you for following Jesus? That brings us to our **second** thing. Jesus says, that if this happens to you, it is a sure sign that you belong to the kingdom of heaven. He repeats Himself in **v.11-12** to drive home the point. “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Jesus is saying that you belong to company of the prophets themselves. Those prophets who are now rejoicing with the angels and the saints in glory. What they are experiencing you will certainly experience. Your persecution is proof positive that you are truly a child of God. What a remarkable thing! That even the devil’s greatest attacks against your faith become a cause for rejoicing. Yes they are painful and miserable but God turns Satan’s very persecution of your soul into a gift. The gift of assurance. So beloved, when Satan attacks you and whispers foul things into your soul, you can rejoice that he is giving you evidence that you have come into possession of eternal life. Likewise, when the world hates you and reviles you, it is simply “telling you that you do not belong to it...you belong to another realm, thus proving the fact that you are going to heaven.”²⁰ That’s

²⁰ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Eerdmans Publishing, 1976), pg. 124; also cf. pg.684 in the second volume of his biography by Iain Murray.

the first way you endure persecution: by trusting what God's word says about it, that it is a sure sign that you will one day dwell in God's very presence.

2. We endure persecution by calling on His Name

Look how the Psalmist ends this section in **v.88** "In your steadfast love give me life, that I may keep the testimonies of your mouth." So fascinating to see how he prays. He doesn't see his greatest need as deliverance, but rather that God would revive his soul with a renewed sense of God's love.²¹ If God were to plant within your very soul a renewed sense of His eternal and unchangeable love for you, you could face every persecution with the same courage that John Paton did.

John Paton was a missionary in the 19th century to the islands of New Hebrides, a chain of islands in the South Pacific. When Paton first announced he was going to the islands he was told "You will be eaten by cannibals." Indeed the natives were cannibals. In fact they were a cruel and brutal people practicing infanticide as well as widow sacrifice—"killing the widows of deceased men so they could serve their husbands in the next world."²² Historians are stunned by Paton's courage to minister as he faced attack after attack after attack. On one occasion when he was surrounded by armed islanders ready to kill him, he wrote in his journal: "I...assured them that I was not afraid to die, for at death my Savior would take me to be with Himself in Heaven, and to be far happier than I had ever been on Earth. I then lifted up my hands and eyes to the Heavens, and prayed aloud for Jesus...either to protect me or to take me home to Glory as He saw to be for the best."²³ That was how Paton prayed. He endured persecution not because he was braver than you or I. But because his soul was constantly renewed by the sight of a

²¹ As Stephen Yuille notes "the Psalmist identifies his greatest need not as as immediate deliverance from trouble but as a revival of his soul that comes by way of a renewed sense of God's love for him." J. Stephen Yuille, *The Path of Life: Blessedness in Seasons of Lament*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), pg. 110

²² John Piper, *Filling up the Afflictions of Christ*, (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2009), pg. 56

²³ *ibid*, pg. 77-78

loving Savior. That's the second way you endure suffering—by being renewed in your soul with the love of Christ when you call on His name in prayer.

3. We endure persecution by looking to Him who was persecuted for us

These verses in Psalm 119 are only *secondarily* about the Christian. They are primarily a portrait of our Savior. Jesus Christ is the one who became like a wineskin in the smoke (v.83). It was Jesus who was made an end to on the earth (v.87). It was Christ who was physically and spiritually ruined by persecution. In fact the Scripture says that his appearance was marred beyond human semblance (Isaiah 52:14). He was not only persecuted by the world and the nominal church and Satan, but in a sense He was persecuted by His own Father. Acts 2:23 says “This Jesus, [was] delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, [He was] crucified and killed.” Beloved, it was the definite plan of God from all eternity that Christ would be crucified. God planned it. Why? Because you and I faced something far more worse than persecution: the wrath of a holy God towards sin. What is the wrath of man or even the wrath of Satan compared to the wrath of an omnipotent God? Losing your job or your health or your money or your reputation or even your life is nothing—nothing—compared to losing your soul. That is the ultimate evil.²⁴ And there was nothing you could do, no great work you could accomplish, no deed you could complete to stop the loss of your soul.

But Jesus Christ stood in your stead—not because you showed yourself worthy or lovely or deserving. No. The Scripture says that “...while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.” (Romans 5:10). You weren't looking for a remedy for your sin. But Christ sought out a remedy for you with His own blood. And He has demonstrated to the universe that His remedy for your sin was sufficient when He rose from the dead three days later. And you can know that you have escaped the wrath of God when you simply trust Christ. “Whoever believes in Him is not condemned” (John 3:19)

²⁴ Stephen Yuille, *The Path of Life: Blessedness in Seasons of Lament*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), pg. 110

“Whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (**John 3:16**). Beloved that is how we endure the evil of persecution. By seeing that there is something far worse than persecution—the wrath of God—and that Christ by His own blood has rescued us from it.

Application

1. What kind of a Word has God given us?

He’s given us a Word that will strengthen us in persecution. But a casual relationship with the Word will not help you fight the persecution of the world or the devil. Steven J. Yuille says here “When we feel like the Psalmist, a devotional reading of Scripture can actually turn into something very unhealthy and unhelpful. We can end up navel-gazing. We must engage in the hard and tedious work of word study, character study, or book study. It isn’t very glamorous, but it is God’s way of making the ground under us grow stronger.”²⁵

2. What kind of a world do we live in?

We live in a world in which as a Christian, you will suffer persecution. It’s guaranteed from the Scripture. **2 Timothy 3:12** says “*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*” But God has so designed persecution, paradoxically for you to gain strength from it. If the world is cruel and unkind and spiteful towards you, then say to yourself: “Ah unhappy people; they are doing this because they do not know Him.”²⁶ And then remember that Jesus calls you blessed for being persecuted for His sake, for yours is the kingdom of Heaven. Persecution should make you realize all the more what is waiting for you. For so they persecuted the prophets.

²⁵ *ibid*, pg. 111

²⁶ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Eerdmans Publishing, 1976), pg. 124;

3. What kind of a church should we want?

We should want the kind of church that counts it a blessing to be persecuted. I don't mean this in some sort of romantic way. Persecution is always painful. But persecution is a test of our authenticity. Are you being persecuted? Are you facing opposition from one of those categories—the world—the nominal church—or the devil. Because if you never face persecution, the question must be asked: are you being faithful to the Word? Jesus said “‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (**John 15:20**). So test yourself: are you living to please Jesus Christ? Is there a level of persecution in your life that validates your answer?

4. What kind of Savior do we need?²⁷

We need a Savior who will stand with us in our persecution. When Martin Luther preached that we are justified or made righteous by faith alone on the merits of Christ alone, he was threatened with imprisonment and death by the Roman Catholic Church. This of course discouraged him. He often would say to his friend Philipp Melancthon “Let's sing the forty-sixth Psalm.”²⁸ It's there where we find these words: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (**Psalm 46:1**). It was from Psalm 46 that Luther penned “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” It became the hymn of the Reformation. It was this song that gave strength and courage to a group of German princes who on April 20, 1529, stood up against the Prince and the Roman church to formally protest the Christian faith. It was this meeting where the word “Protestants” came from. They protested, not because they were unafraid, or because they were strong. They protested because they had the Right Man on their side. Here is the second stanza of that great song:

²⁷ With the exception of the first question, the last three are from Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross, Preaching the Word Series*, (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2014), pg. 17-23

²⁸ Steven P. Demme, *Hymns For Family Worship*, (USA,: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), 53

Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing,
were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing.
You ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he;
Lord Sabaoth is his name, from age to age the same,
and He must win the battle.