

## **The Be-Attitudes: 8. Persecuted for Righteousness**

Matthew 5.1-12 [New International Reader's Version]

Mason United Methodist Church

6 June 2010

What if your livelihood, or your very life, depended on your belief in Jesus?

What would it be like if you were confronted about your Christian beliefs and told to recant or face severe prosecution, persecution, or even death?

It is difficult to imagine in our day and age that anyone would face such persecution or terror because of their belief in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God.

The first Christians suffered much for their adherence to Christianity. Completely disrupted were their work, their social life, and their home life. Scottish preacher and theologian William Barclay writes, "The penalties which a Christian had to suffer were terrible beyond description. All the world knows of the Christians who were flung to the lions or burned at the stake; but these were kindly deaths. Nero wrapped the Christians in pitch and set them alight, and used them as living torches to light his gardens. He [had them sewn] in the skins of wild animals and set his hunting dogs upon them to tear them to death. They were tortured on the rack [by stretching]; they were scraped with pincers; molten lead was poured hissing upon them; red hot brass plates were affixed to the tenderest parts of their bodies; eyes were torn out; parts of their bodies were cut off and roasted before their eyes; their hands and feet were burned while cold water was poured over them to lengthen the agony. These things are not pleasant to think about, but these are the things [people] had to be prepared for, if [they] took their stand for Christ." [Barclay, William. *The Daily Study Bible. Volume 1: The Gospel of Matthew*. Edinburgh, Scotland: The Saint Andrew Press, 1956. Page 108]

Why were the Christians persecuted? Why would anyone leading a peaceable Christian existence be subjected to such atrocities? Barclay says...

There were certain slanders which were spread abroad about the Christians, slanders for which the [leaders of the synagogue] were in no small measure responsible.

(a) The Christians were accused of cannibalism. The words of the Last Supper – "This is my body," "This cup is the New Testament in my blood" – were taken and twisted into a story that the Christians sacrificed a child and ate the flesh.

(b) The Christians were accused of immoral practices, and their meetings were said to be orgies of lust. The Christian weekly meeting was called the *Agapē*, [Greek] the Love Feast; and the name was grossly misinterpreted. Christians greeted each other with the kiss of peace; and the kiss of peace became a ground on which to build the slanderous accusations.

(c) The Christians were accused of being incendiaries. It is true they spoke of the coming end of the world, and they clothed their message in the apocalyptic pictures of the end of the world in flames. Their slanderers took these words and twisted them into the threats of political and revolutionary incendiarism.

(d) The Christians were accused of tampering with family relationships. Christianity did in fact split families as we have seen; and so Christianity was represented as something which divided man and wife, and disrupted the home. [Ibid, pages 108-109]

All of this is not a very pretty picture; and it certainly is not a comfortable opening to a Sunday sermon.

In our modern day we are appalled at such monstrous and devilish acts; but we have heard these things before and take comfort in the fact that we are living in the here-and-now and not in those early days when Christianity was a new and despised religious outbreak. In fact, most of us in the United States know very little about persecution except what we know from history. In fact we might well think that in our modern day these things just do not happen.

It is very likely that we can imagine no instance where we would be so physically threatened to name the name of Jesus and say that we were, in fact, Christian.

But I was intrigued by the messages from a magazine shared with me by Mason Church's own Jim Nevins entitled *The Voice of the Martyrs* [PO Box 443, Bartlesville, OK 74005-0443, [www.persecution.com](http://www.persecution.com), Special Issue 2010]. [*Show magazine*.] In this special 2010 issue are articles about modern day persecution of persons in various countries where individuals have dared to call themselves Christian.

Included in this issue was a map of the world which depicts areas and nations where government policy or practice prevents Christians from obtaining Bibles or other Christian literature [*show map*]. Highlighted in orange are countries with government-sanctioned circumstances or anti-Christian laws that lead to Christians being harassed, imprisoned, killed or deprived of possessions or liberties because of their beliefs and witness.

Also highlighted in red are hostile areas in nations where governments consistently attempt to provide protection for the Christian population, but where Christians are victims of violence because of their beliefs or witness.

One printed story on page 2 is particularly compelling.

In Pakistan last year when a mob of about 3000 came to burn the Christian village of Korian, the Christian families ran for their lives. But 86-year-old believer Baba Qadar could not run. He could not even walk. The mob found him lying on his bed outside his house.

He told us, “My family wanted to take me but I could not run. I forced them to run for safety. I told them, ‘Go! I will remain here.’ About 20 to 30 of the attackers surrounded my bed. One of them shouted at me, ‘You are old, so it is better that you [renounce Christianity].’ I said, ‘No, no, I will not. Burn me or kill me or do whatever you like. I [believe in] Jesus Christ.’ Then they beat me with their weapons – pistols, Kalishnikovs and big sticks. They kicked me.

In the morning, Baba’s son came secretly back to the village and placed Baba back on his bed, but the fanatics, still in the village, saw this and chased him away. Baba lay on his bed, still harassed by the persecutors, for three days. Then his daughter came with the police to take him away to her village.

This man dared to summon the courage to witness to Jesus as his Savior. That witness had its cost; but the two pictures of Baba in the magazine show a man, holding his Bible, and with a smile that came from the inside of his soul to spread across the outside of his face

It was a privilege for me in 1990 to host a chaplain from the Royal Army, Sam Daviess, as he visited our headquarters area in Korea just a few miles from the demilitarized zone. He had been chaplain to the Gloucestershire Regiment of the Royal Army; and when the Chinese overran their position in 1950, Chaplain Daviess stayed behind with the regimental medic and sergeant major to care for the wounded and dying. They were all taken prisoner and held in North Korea in solitary confinement for over three years.

Chaplain Daviess rode with me to a spot called Gloster Hill, the place where so many of his soldiers died or were captured along with him. We stopped the vehicle and he asked me to wait for him as he walked across the wooden foot bridge and placed his hand on the bronze plaque memorializing the soldiers who died in Korea on that day in 1950. When he returned there were tears in his eyes as he looked into the dry stream bed and said, “I remember our soldiers sitting down there and changing their socks before we went to the top of the hill where so many would perish.

A few weeks later, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, was in Korea to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Anglican Mission in Korea. After the ceremony, the Archbishop and Chaplain Daviess rode with me to the village of PanMunJom where a foot-wide concrete sidewalk divides South from North Korea in the Joint Security Area. By special arrangement with the Military Armistice Commission, the Archbishop and Chaplain Daviess walked out, under armed guard, onto the Bridge of No Return – the bridge where he had been taken captive in 1950, and the one which he had crossed to freedom over three years later – all the way to the North Korean side. There we shared a prayer of thanksgiving for freedom and life – and remembrance for those who did not return. I will never forget that moment when a man who had understood persecution because of his belief in democracy and in the spiritual and physical well-being of his soldiers – walked back to freedom: in that part of the world, and freedom in the Risen Christ.

May it please God for us never to face persecution, or to see our country persecuted, for the faith which is within us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a very exceptional person, a Christian clergyman who challenged Hitler publicly (even returning to Germany after having escaped for a time first to England and then to America). The Nazis arrested him in 1943 and Himmler himself ordered him hanged in April 1945, just a few weeks before the allied liberation of his concentration camp. Thank God, however, his insightful book *The Cost of Discipleship* survived the Nazi book burnings.

Bonhoeffer, about two weeks within the same age as Martin Luther King, Junior, was when their respective deaths came at age 39, writes these words in that book:

Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like a cheapjack's wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut-rate prices. Grace is represented as the Church's inexhaustible treasury, from which she showers blessings with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits. Grace without price; grace without cost! And the essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. Since the cost was infinite, the possibilities of using and spending it are infinite. What would grace be, if it were not cheap?

In such a Church the world finds a cheap covering for its sins; no contrition is required, still less any real desire to be delivered from sin.

Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. Grace alone does everything, they say, and so everything can remain as it was before.

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, [it is] baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

[Internet: [www.liberallikejesus.org](http://www.liberallikejesus.org) citing Bonhoeffer's *Cost* pages 42-44]

Our redemption came at great cost to Jesus. It cost him his life. It was a gift willingly given so that the sacrificial system would be ended, and we could be *at one* with God.

With due recognition of the militaristic and patristic inferences of the old hymn written in 1858 [just prior to the Civil War] by George Duffield, Junior, the words to *Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus* [1989 United Methodist Hymnal No. 514] have a compelling and hope-filled message for us today.

Stand up, stand up for Jesus, ye soldiers of the cross;  
Lift high his royal banner, it must not suffer loss.  
From victory unto victory his army shall he lead,  
Till every foe is vanquished, and Christ is Lord indeed.

Stand up, stand up for Jesus, the strife will not be long;  
This day the noise of battle, the next the victor's song.  
To those who vanquish evil a crown of life shall be;  
They with the King of Glory shall reign eternally.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs." [Matthew 5.10]

Amen.