

## Facing Persecution with Joy

When it comes to the blessings and benefits of knowing and following Jesus, where do I even start?

Forgiveness ... freedom ... eternal life ... peace ... purpose ... hope ... comfort ... security ...

I queried friends and acquaintance on Facebook, about the blessings of following Christ. No one mentioned persecution. But persecution is part of the package.

We don't like to talk about persecution. I've never heard an evangelist talk about persecution in his appeal for others to come to faith in Christ. But Jesus did. He didn't refer explicitly to persecution, but He did call people to count the cost. "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27, but read the full section: verses 25-33).

Jesus talked about persecution just hours before He experienced the ultimate persecution: His arrest and crucifixion (John 15:18—16:11). He didn't do it to scare the disciples but to prepare them. "I have told you these things to keep you from stumbling" (16:1).

Jesus told His disciples, "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (15:20). People are not necessarily persecuted because they call themselves Christians; people are persecuted because they follow Jesus and they strive to be like Him. "Christian" is just a title for too many people, and it doesn't mean much in the way they think or live. But when we live for Jesus—seeking to think and act like Him—that gets people's attention. And that's what will give us persecuted. As Paul said, "All who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12).

For the record, I'd rather not be persecuted. But when it comes, I won't run away. The early disciples did not seek out persecution, but at the first instance of harsh treatment and flogging, the apostles rejoiced. Rejoiced?! Yes! They went their way "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to be treated shamefully on behalf of the Name" (Acts 5:41).

We can rejoice too. Persecution says something about our faith. It says that our words and lives are pointing to Jesus enough to make some people uncomfortable,

make them wish we would stop, and make them determined to do what they can to see that we stop.

Paul described us as "heirs of God and coheirs with Christ —if indeed we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom. 8:17). Paul was not making a cause-and-effect statement; he was not saying we will only experience glory with Him if we first suffer with Him. But that fact that we are identified with Christ means we will experience those things identified with Him, which includes both suffering and glory.

In the face of persecution, I take comfort in two truths:

- 1. Persecution is not an easy road, but I don't walk it alone.** Earlier, I mentioned Jesus's teaching about persecution. Scattered in that same passage are references to the presence of His Holy Spirit. I need not fear when He is with me. "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but one of power, love, and sound judgment" (2 Tim. 1:7).
- 2. Persecution is not a long road.** Our human tendency is to focus on right now, this singular moment, but in the light of eternity—in light of resting in His eternal presence and glory—the totality of my whole earthly life seems but a moment. Spend some time with 2 Corinthians 4:7-18 to see this truth. Let me highlight just a few of the verses:

"Now we have this treasure in clay jars, so that this extraordinary power may be from God and not from us. We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; we are perplexed but not in despair; we are persecuted but not abandoned; we are struck down but not destroyed.... For we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you.... Therefore we do not give up. Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day. For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor. 4:7-9,14,16-17).

I love Jesus, and one reason I do is because, even on the hard days, I have His presence, His counsel, His strength, and His joy. Even in the face of persecution, I can still have joy.