

HOW THEN SHOULD WE SUFFER

TYLER VELIN | AUGUST 17TH, 2014 | MATTHEW 5:2-11

And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 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.”

Those are the words of Jesus in Matthew chapter 5. Two things stand out to me as I read this text, “Blessed are those who mourn, and blessed are those who are persecuted.”

Now I want us to truly understand what is being said in these two statements.

Because what we know about this world is that it is broken. Because of sin, this world is fundamentally flawed that means that when we die, we will die as scholars in suffering.

We know that not only has our heart become tainted by sin, but so has our world. We suffer in this world simply by living. For Christian and non-Christian alike, we will endure suffering at the hands of a broken creation. We have experienced that in our church, we have experienced that in our city.

Miscarriages, cancer, car crashes, birth defects, mental illness, suicide, natural disasters, disease, and death. Creation is broken, our bodies are broken, our minds are broken. Because of sin. We can call this natural evil. Evil which is naturally present in a broken world.

Then to top that off we have moral evil. Because sin has not simply stained our bodies, and it has stained our hearts, humanity is capable of moral choices which result in sinful and harmful events.

Murder, beatings, slavery, sex trafficking, riots, hate crimes, rape, abortion, genocide and robbery.

Both this natural evil, and this moral evil are common to man. No gender, race or creed is safe from its effect. And yet, we as Christians know another kind of evil. Jesus spoke of this evil in Matthew 5, which we just read, but he also speaks of it later on in the book of Matthew: **Matthew 10:22, 24:9**.

You see we will face suffering because of our faith in Christ. I’m not talking about tummy aches that keep you from church. I’m talking about persecution against you because of Christ.

Currently in Iraq nearly 850,000 people are being displaced by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, what is been called ISIS. And while that number includes all sorts of people groups, Christians are being specifically targeted during the expansion of ISIS’s rule. Christian houses are being marked with the Arabic letter “N”, raided and burned. Christians in ISIS occupied cities are being offered two choices convert to Islam or die. Dozens of Christians and their children were murdered earlier this summer while at Church in Nigeria, thousands of Christians are under threat of persecution and death in Asia and East Africa.

And while we in America live in relative freedom from persecution, we should not think that our conditions are normative or expected.

So I say again how is it that Jesus said “Blessed are you who mourn, and blessed are you who are persecuted.”

One of the top Greek dictionaries defines the word “Blessed” as: Being fortunate or happy because of circumstances. Because of circumstances? Because of mourning, because of persecution we are fortunate or happy?

More importantly the grammar of the sentence is not, blessed are those who have mourned, blessed are those who have been persecuted. As if when we look back from a future position we are able to find blessing in the midst of it. But the grammar is in the present tense, blessed are you who are persecuted, blessed are those who mourn. As in there may be an ultimate and final reward yet to come in the future, but the blessing which Christ himself is talking about is also present in the middle of your current state.

How? Don’t we have to answer that? If one thing is certain, and that is that we will know suffering, shouldn’t we want these two verses to grasp us by our heart? Don’t we want to be certain of our confidence? Don’t you want to be able to preach that hope to yourself? Don’t you want to be able to share that hope with others?

So that was a long introduction, but what I want to do today is to provide us a hope for suffering, specifically suffering which happens not simply to Christians, but because we are Christians. I want to look at two points of confidence, and then two methods of living. So let’s **pray**.

One thing I love about scripture, is that it is comforting. Even in what appears to be the darkest hour we can cling to scripture because it is true, it is faithful, and it is God’s gracious gift to us.

So when we look at scripture we don’t find lackluster confidence, we find perfect peace because we are presented with the faithful account of who God is.

This is our first confidence in the face of suffering: **God is in Control**.

This might seem cliché, but I don’t know of a better place to start. Now what do I mean when I say God is in control? Do I mean that God is in control in that he controls the end? Do I mean that God is able to control everything, but has chosen to not exercise that at all times? Do I mean that God is in control of every detail of every action of man? Well, what does the Bible say?

Ps 135:5-6, Prov 21:1, Eph 1:11, Dan 4:35, Ps 115:3

Looking at these verses, I think it is safe to say that God is intricately in control of all things going on everywhere. He brings the counsel of nations to nothing, he frustrates the rulers of this world, because God’s will is greater and more effective than our will.

Now here is the thing, God is in ultimate and direct control of this world, both its good and its evil, both its peace and its suffering, nothing happens which God does not will to happen. Now, if I were in the position of God, this would be a fearful and questionable hope. I am short tempered, I am quick to anger, I am selfish. But God is not. To say that God has complete control over this world is saying that this world, in all of its problems is ruled by the most perfect, just, and righteous ruler who will accomplish all he wishes to accomplish. Our peace in uncertainty is tied to the merit of our ruler. And we have a marvelous ruler.

So here is what I want us to know, this world is not what it should be because of sin, nor is it what it will be, but because God is sovereignly working his plan, because as Romans 8 says, God is building his creation towards its ultimate redemption, we live in the best possible world at this point in redemptive history.

Nothing that will happen to you, or around you is outside of God's will.

Our second point of confidence is that: **Christ is Sufficient**

Now what do I mean by sufficient. I mean a couple things. First, I mean that Christ is sufficient to pay the penalty for our sins. **1 Peter 3:18**. You see the greatest suffering the world will ever know is life without Christ. Where in this world we face a physical death, those who are enemies of Christ face an eternal death. Jesus paid that death for those who are his. Jesus faced the ultimate suffering and brought death to its knees so that he might redeem suffering for the rest of us.

Christ's death and resurrection is not only sufficient to bring us out of God's wrath and into his grace, but it is also sufficient to bring us a right perspective. Christ opens our eyes to the weight of our salvation. We get to spend eternity with God. Eternity in a new creation where there is no more death or disease, no more sin or hate, no more murder or malice. We get to gaze at the face of God and his beauty forever. And that eternal perspective shapes or present reality.

How is it that we can read such convicting and stirring stories of Christian's brothers and sisters who embrace death, torture and imprisonment for the sake of Christ? Because they have a right perspective on this world. They see the world not through the mortal eyes of a sinner, not in terms of a finite existence, but through the eyes of one who will live forever and has been ransomed from ultimate death to infinite life. And they want others to be won to that same hope.

Look back at Paul's words in **Phil 3:7-8**. Because Christ has brought a new perspective to Paul he is able to see suffering rightly. Paul's faith in Christ has redeemed his view on suffering because Christ has breathed purpose into everything. Look at what Jesus said in Luke **21:12-13**.

Did you see what Jesus said? He said that persecution was going to come, so that we may bear witness to Christ. What man means as evil, Christ has redeemed and purposed to use for his glory. This is why the old adage rings true: "The Blood of the Martyrs is the seed of the church."

Christ has not only redeemed, but purposed persecution. KJ was talking with me the other day and he pointed out something to me that brought so much credibility to this. We all know Romans 8:28, God works all things for our good, but have you really read it in context of the next verse? **Rom 8:28-29**.

God working all things for our good doesn't mean that persecution or suffering will stop, but it means that in the midst of it we have been given an opportunity to be conformed more to Christ. We have been given an opportunity to cash in on Christ's redemption and find it fully sufficient!

This is what leads Paul to say what he said next in **Rom 8:35-39**. We have life in Christ therefore we fear not death in witness.

It would be very easy for us to look at the persecution going on in North Korea and say that God is losing. But when we see how Christ has redeemed persecution for his glory, one day we will meet those Christians from North Korea who have died for their faith and they will say just as Joseph did, "What man meant for evil, God meant for good."

This is why I love the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism: "What is our only confidence in life and death? That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Savior

Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit he also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for him.”

What a hope we have church.

Now what do we do in light of this hope? Two things.

1. **We Pray**

We pray specifically for the persecuted church. Today the church will put out on Twitter and on Facebook a link to a map which shows where and to what extent the church is undergoing persecution pray through that map with your family once a week. Make it part of your weekly prayer routine. **Hebrews 13:3**

Here are some specific things you can pray for:

Pray that the persecution stops. Pray that God’s justice will come against the evil men who are behind these acts.

But pray that even amidst the persecution that our brothers and sisters may be filled with a peace that surpasses all understand. Pray that God provides them the words so that they may bear witness to the gospel not only in action but in word. Pray for churches to grow in strength in these areas to better serve and care for their people. Pray that the gospel dwells richly inside of them to the praise and glory of God. And pray that people will come to know Jesus because of the faithful witness of his church.

Lastly, we can **Prepare**.

Here is the thing, God has been gracious to us in America. Not because God loves America more than he loves Sudan, but because God for reasons he only knows, has chosen to allow us to live in relative freedom.

Yet, it would be unwise to assume it will always be this way. We at Grizzly Christian Fellowship are preparing for a day when we are no longer allowed to meet on campus at the University because of our beliefs, and what we are doing with our students right now is equipping them with a message that will remain even if our weekly meetings will not.

Pray that God gives you a rich faith in God and a great message in Christ. Pray that your faith doesn’t atrophy in this time of peace, but rather it prepares for a time when boldness is needed. Prepare to give and to go to the nations with the message of Christ.

But the greatest way you can prepare for persecution, is to live a life which will warrant it. You see Christians will be persecuted for being Christians, not simply for attending a church. If you are not evangelizing and growing in your faith now. If you are uncomfortable with the limited persecution you have now, you will not fare well when that persecution becomes more fierce. So practice in the peace, and prepare for the storm.

And by God’s grace, and through his vessel the church, the name of Christ will go forth, and one day every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Pray, prepare, and trust the faithful God who gives and takes away. Let’s pray.

