

XXVI. Timeless Truth for Timely Topics in Biblical Perspective

What Does the Bible Say?

“Our Ministry to the Persecuted Church”

Hebrews 13:1–3

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This is a rather focused sermon and sober in its content but it's actually necessary. I'll be spending two studies on this. Our text for this study will be in Hebrews 13 but I want to start by reading from II Timothy 4 as a backdrop. This is the last thing Paul writes before he dies in prison under persecution. He will die a martyr's death for Christ. II Timothy 4:9–18 says *[9] Do your best to come to me soon. [10] For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. [11] Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. [12] Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. [13] When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. [14] Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. [15] Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message. [16] At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! [17] But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. [18] The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

The grass withers, the flower fades, God's Word abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

I have three questions I want to ask you and one confession. Here is the confession first. The material the Lord has laid upon my heart is not new for me for it is material that a mentor of mine named Al Martian pastored years ago and it has always stuck with me. I have made it my own throughout the years. In that day when he talked about the persecuted church he set me onto an agency that you're about to be set on and I think it's the best instrument for us as a church to be informed about the persecuted church with effective strategies and tactics for action. The ministry is called Open Doors. So why are we bringing them?

Today's challenge is obvious. In North Africa they are averaging 50 a week who are being put to death for Christ. Almost all of them are children because they name the Name of Christ. Most of you are aware of what happened on the shores of Libya. Syria at one time was the seat of the Gospel explosion and it was right nearby there that we were first called Christians in the opening decades of the work of the Gospel. Even with the evil onslaught of the manmade religion of Islam still up to two million were confessing Christ not many years ago. Now at best is numbering around a hundred thousand. Iran had two million and now maybe 150,000 with most of them cowering because of having to hide for their very lives. Still standing for Christ but now pushed beyond the periphery of life into the basements of life with their very life under threat. Just got word this last week that a cleric in India was given authority by the state to actually burn Christian churches and I could go on and on with this kind of information.

We are well aware of the stories of persecution that came out of the Reformation in the Gospel Awakening from the book of martyrs but it is my opinion that the anguish, deprivation and attempted annihilation of believers throughout the world today has never reached the heights

that it has now or should I say the depths that it has now. We by the providence of God have lived in a bubble of God's kindness and grace where we have not encountered such things but that is there. Now what are we supposed to do? As deeply as we might feel it we can't move simply on emotion. We have to move framed by the Word of God. So how would Christ have us from His Word which is all we need for faith and practice have Christ's church ministering to Christ's persecuted church? I'm going to take two studies to show you this but I believe this study is the foundational one.

This is found in Hebrews 13. I want to set this in context. This Gospel earthquake that appeared 2100 years ago hit Jerusalem, spread to Judea and Samaria and then went to the utter most parts of the world, powerfully moving by the grace of God. Gospel blessings were breaking out and you can see this in Jerusalem. Here are twelve that becomes 120, 120 becomes 3,000 just counting the men, and to the 3,000 people are being added every day and then another 5,000 which is just counting the men so now you probably have about 18,000 to 20,000 naming the Name of Christ in the streets of Jerusalem, gathering in the temple and going house to house. The Gospel is exploding and moving and then the evil empire strikes back.

Satan has been defeated but not totally debilitated in God's providence and he strikes back with his schemes. Satan has three schemes which we have studied. Scheme number one is infiltration which we call today theological liberalism where he infiltrates the church with false teaching and false leaders. Secondly, he has the scheme of imitation and we see this in the wheats and tares. There are manmade religions with Gospel perversions like our therapy gospel, prosperity gospel, word of faith gospel which are all deviations of the Gospel of grace creating churchianity and not Christianity. Churchianity is defining the gospel in the metrics of this world instead of the metrics of grace. Thirdly, is his scheme of intimidation. He uses the state for this usually. He attempts to intimidate the leaders and the followers – the lay people, the fellowship, and the membership as well.

In the book of Acts we see these Gospel blessings of expansion that are going on. Then you have the evil empire striking back where they will incarcerate the leaders and intimidate. They will put Stephen to death and they will start dragging others away to be put to death. Some will die in this intimidation under the annihilation of the power of the state with its sword. Peter and John were incarcerated. Some will be dislocated. In Acts 8 the believers were scattered as aliens and strangers from Jerusalem. They were refugees for the Gospel. They went to Judea, Samaria and Antioch living for Christ. The first Christians are Jewish Christians and when Paul goes to these other cities he goes to the Jew first at the synagogue and then the Gentiles. So the first responders are almost always Jews who becomes Christians.

Therefore they not only have to go under local intimidation and Romans intimidation but they have fueled the Jewish leader intimidation like the Sanhedrin. They have all kinds of intimidation and its dislocation, incarceration or annihilation for the Gospel. In fact 14 years after Stephen death by stoning, the brother of Jesus, James who is the head of the church will be cast from the pinnacle of the church and be killed there in Jerusalem. What was happening? Many of the Jewish Christians were starting to fall back, fall away and deny the faith with this intimidation.

So 35 years after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the writer of Hebrews writes to them. He tells them not to be intimidated to go back to the Old Covenant for the Old Covenant has done its work to lay the ground work for the fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Now you are in a better covenant for the Old Covenant is obsolete with its bulls, goats, washings, rituals and all of that. Those were all pointing to Christ and Christ has fulfilled it. Now you are in a superior

covenant, a sufficient covenant for there are better promises and fulfillment in Christ for now we have Jesus and the sacrifices are done. We have the Final Sacrifice that saves sinners through the love of God meeting the holiness of God and saving sinners by the grace of God for the glory of God. After all these warnings and enticements throughout this entire epistle he finally gets to the end.

He tells those who are faithful, not falling away and standing firm to step out. He has told them to stay on message and now he wants them to get on mission and in ministry. He doesn't give everything they are supposed to do in ministry but in Hebrews 13 he gets them started into their ministry by giving them ten ministry admonitions. They are found in Hebrews 13:1–19. I am not planning on covering these ten, just one because it is foundational to the other nine and it defines for us the Biblical framework, motivation and method for the ministry of Christ's church to that church of Christ who is persecuted. So let's start by looking at Hebrews 13:1 but before I do I want to ask you those three questions.

One, do you want all that God's grace can grant to you? Secondly, do you believe all of God's promises are fulfilled in Christ and do you want all the promises of God that are yes and amen in Jesus Christ? Thirdly, do you want every blessing that God has promised to you in Jesus Christ? Remember these three questions as we go through this study. Now let's go to Hebrews 13. I'm not sure who wrote Hebrews. I don't think it was Paul but I do think it was someone close to Paul like Luke or Apollos. The ending of Hebrews tells the people not only to keep standing firm but don't stand still. He wants them to get into ministry by giving them ten admonitions and the basic foundational one is the one we are going to cover. In this foundational admonition he gives three life takeaways and a perspective with each takeaway.

Hebrews 13:1 says [1] *Let brotherly love continue*. This tells us in the body of Christ that we are family. We are brothers and sisters and we have older brothers and sisters that are like fathers and mothers in the body of Christ. What is it that governs our relationship? The Word of God teaches us to love. The fruit of the Spirit starts with love. We are to love the Lord and one another. Do we love the lost? Yes but where we start in our love of Christ is to love one another. Brotherly love is family love, self-denying love, sacrificial and that familial love as a family is to continue which in this context means it is growing and continuing itself where it expands. Then he gives three takeaways where brotherly love needs to expand in the day of Gospel blessings which will create an environment where we need to understand how to love one another because of Gospel blessings of persecution for Christ that will come. How can we endure together? Let brotherly love continue and that's his admonition. Here is a ministry we need to embrace in this fallen world as we expand the Kingdom and the evil empire of the kingdom of darkness keeps striking back with infiltration, imitation and intimidation.

Here is takeaway number one. Hebrew 13:2 says [2] ***Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*** There are some brothers who are strangers and the context of the book of Hebrews especially Hebrews 11 are people who are Gospel homeless, Gospel wandering, Gospel refugees. The persecution of the Gospel that creates dislocation and Peter calls them strangers and aliens. Many of them had to leave Jerusalem and go to Antioch in the book of Acts. When they stood firm for the Gospel and Satan strikes back with the false religion of Judaism with the power of Rome and all those things that impinged upon them many were dislocated by the Gospel. What do we do? Open up your home. Show hospitality to them.

Then he gives a perspective for motivation. When you show them hospitality you might even have an angel sitting down at your table. Some would say that angels here means

messenger and think that it is talking about preachers and missionaries and I think it can be that but it can also just be an angel. He is writing to Hebrew Christians here. Were there any notable Hebrew Christians that perhaps cooked up a meal for three strangers? The Bible tells us those strangers that looked like men were actually two angels and Jesus Himself (The Angel of the Lord) for this happened to Abraham. There is an angelic ministry in the Old Testament and it continues in the New Testament. Angels do periodically manifest themselves normally with a veil that look like men and women. In the Bible whenever they show up unveiled people hit the ground because glory has come. It is not even the glory of the Triune God but the glory of the angelic hosts sends them into fear. Usually the first thing out of their mouth 'fear not' but they usually come veiled in the appearance, not the reality, of humanity. So when you open up your heart and home to those who have been dislocated because of the Gospel you might even be entertaining an angel. That is the perspective of motivation.

The second takeaway is this. Hebrews 13:3a says [3] ***Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them.*** This doesn't stop with one another for it extends to lost people as well but it starts in the body of Christ, the family of Christ. This ministry will overflow to the world but he is saying right now for us as the family of Christ to get it right in the family first. Now he is saying that some are suffering for the Gospel in prison so we are to remember them. To remember is knowledge for the purpose of appropriate action. After the thief on the cross was converted he said to Jesus "Remember me." I want you to be aware. He quit mocking and started confessing. He quit blaspheming and started witnessing. He quit ridiculing and started worshipping. He didn't have long to have a changed life but he had a changed life and after that he says "Remember me" and Jesus remembers him not only because of his conversion but because he takes action appropriate to his knowledge for Jesus says "This day you will be with Me in paradise."

The fourth commandment tells us to remember the Sabbath day. It is holy and to remember it means to take action appropriate to what you know. It is a day of rest from regular labor. It is a day of engagement of personal family and corporate worship. It is a day of spiritual renewal in the Lord. To remember is to know for the purpose of appropriate action. Remember your brothers who are in prison, incarcerated for the sake of the Gospel and take appropriate action.

Then the perspective is remembering those in prison as though you were there in prison in place of them. So instead of it being them, it's you. What would you do for you if you were where they were? We call this the perspective of identification. You will find this in I Corinthians 12:26 which says [26] ***If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.*** Paul says in Romans 12:15, [15] ***Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.*** We see this in Jesus. The reason we identify with each other is because Jesus identifies with us. On the road to Damascus the Lord said to Saul "Saul, Saul why persecutest thou Me?" Saul was the Apostle untimely born. He wasn't around, present and functioning during the life of Jesus so he wasn't there at the cross. So how was he persecuting Jesus? When he participated in the stoning of Stephen, dragging people away from their families, putting them in prison and signing their death warrants having been authorized to do so by the legal authorities that simply wasn't persecuting the members of the body of Christ but Christ Himself for Christ is identified with them.

When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego went into the fiery furnace Jesus went with them. When you go through the fires I will be with you so whatever is done to His people is done to Christ. Therefore whatever is done to one of my brothers and sisters is being done to

me. Now how would I want them to respond to me if I was there in that incarceration of depravation?

The third takeaway is this. Hebrews 13:3b which says [3b] *and (remember) those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.* These are ones experiencing torture as their body is getting ready for annihilation. We are to remember them and these are all over today for this is actually happening today. Some of those refugees are your brothers and sisters that are being forced out of these places. Some are incarcerated and have no court of appeals, no attorneys. They are in prison for Christ's sake, having confessed Christ. Some of them are losing limbs. Most of us won't do anything until we know and when we know we need to take appropriate action. Wives and daughters are being assaulted sexually, being raped and being sold into sex trafficking cartels. Now put your body in the place of their body.

This is the perspective of substitution by vicarious substitution. We all have appetites and what if you were being denied that meal that you are thinking about right now and then the next one and the next one and the next one? What if you were denied the appetite of drink? You are thirsty. What if you were denied the access of sexual intimacy within marriage because you have no access to your husband or wife to embrace? What if you were under that threat of physical torture with all of your own nerve endings bear under the whip? Paul was put under the whip three times with up to 39 lashes. He was put in prison. He was tortured. He was isolated. I'm supposed to remember that. What would that feel like? I have those nerve endings that are raw under the whip. This is not some romanticized novel for this is really happening to their bodies.

So if that is the case then how do we handle this? How can we love our brothers who for the sake of Christ and the Gospel are suffering the persecution of dislocation, incarceration, annihilation and torture? We do this through hospitality, providing a refuge and we remember. So here is our takeaway for this study which I purposely did not try to shorten for this will guide us as we move into the days to come. Until He comes which I hope is soon, this will be our lot for we are in a broken world and there are casualties in the army of the Lord and the family of God. When our brothers and sisters are suffering these intimidations how should we respond under this admonition?

Here is the takeaway. Because of our love for Christ and His church, we will knowingly, thoughtfully, sacrificially and prayerfully seek to personally (individually) and corporately (as a body) encourage, embrace and uphold our brothers and sisters as they stand firm for and in Christ. It will cost us to minister to them. It must be saturated with prayer. Put prayer in the agenda. We need to be accurately informed. If you love the Lord your heart is moved on this and for God's people.

That means you are a prime target for charlatans who know how to put the right pictures on the television and right internet pleas where you start sending money to people who don't get that money where they say it's going to go. There are people who will take advantage of you on this and I wish I could say this isn't true. If it is on the internet or television it does not mean it is true and we need to know where things are going. We need to have accurate information. Emotionally and personally we need to be prepared, prayed up and ready. Now that we're exposed we get engaged with action appropriately as we remember, personally and corporately doing this.

That's why we have a whole team that will guide us on this one issue continually. We have an agency called Open Doors who are trustworthy theologically and accurately who we will go through. We will have projects, situations, teams and people so that we can know about this

and engage individually, in small groups, in families and in congregational communities. Find out what is happening in the mission field through our weekly letters. Get informed so that we can have appropriate action. We will try to create opportunities for us to engage in this together in accountable, accurate situations where we know that what we're doing is actually reaching the right people to meet their needs. We want to do it because we love our brothers and sisters and because Jesus loves them.

Why do we do this? We have bodies too and have an idea what they must feel like, what it feels like to be deprived, to be without family, to identify with them. Jesus is with them and we want to be with them. We are one with them. We want to weep with them, rejoice with them, hurt with them and for them. We want to help their hurt. We don't want a political campaign of just saying 'I feel your pain' but we want reality and want them to know the balm of Gilead in Christ. Christ is with you and one of the ways He is with you is through us and He is coming to you. We want to remember a refuge and hospitality for you.

One great benefit of this if we start thinking our way through this is we can finally get outside of ourselves. We are so consumed with ourselves in this country so we pervert Gospel into prosperity gospel, therapy gospel and the gospel is all about me and my self-esteem. When we see what our brothers and sisters are going through that stuff doesn't make any sense. There is no safe place in this world for there is only one safe place and that's in Jesus. When you're in Jesus you're in an unsafe place called the world. In Christ we have Jesus and we want to bring the knowledge and encouragement of Christ. We want our families and children to learn that. We don't want them to grow up thinking that everything is all about them. We want them to understand what their brothers and sisters went through in the Reformation but what they are going through right now for Christ and in Christ.

We begin to benefit personally as we do this and maybe another benefit is that we are prepared for what could be possibly coming for us. With all due respect, we are not persecuted here. Can you imagine children in the Sudan who are from believing parents who are being killed every week saying let's pray for the Americans who no longer have Starbucks cups with Jesus on them. How does that make sense? That's not persecution. We are targeted. Our Christian truth, Christian witness, Christian mission and ministry are being targeted but we're not being persecuted. Our livelihoods are targeted. Ask the coach in Seattle who would go out to the field and pray after every game. He was told he would lose his job if he kept doing that but they gave him a room to do it in. In other words, we will marginalize you. That is the step before the persecution of annihilating you. Our lives are not at stake. Yes we are being targeted but we're not going to feel sorry for ourselves. We have so many opportunities here. We are going to reach out to those who are being persecuted through incarceration, dislocation, annihilation, decapitation etc. that are taking place with them.

I will end by answering my three questions. Do you want all God grants you by grace? Philippians 1:29 says [29] *For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.* Do you want the promises of God that are yes and amen in Jesus? John 15:20 says [20] *Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.* II Timothy 3:12 says [12] *Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.* Do you want the blessings? Matthew 5:11 says [11] *Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*

Right now I'm not under that. I am being targeted but I have brothers and sisters that are under it and I want to remember them. I don't want them to write a letter like Paul did when he said when I had to stand for Jesus no one came to stand with me. Here he is dislocated and incarcerated and they attempted to feed him to the lions but the Lord delivered him. They were going to annihilate him but only Luke was with him. Others left him and some were even working against him. They became traitors and that's not where we want to be because that's family. We're going to our brothers and sisters. We're going to know the situation and we're going to respond to them because ultimately we're not only responding to them but we are responding to Jesus because here is what He'll say when you get to heaven.

Matthew 25:35–40 says [35] *For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, [36] I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.* [37] *Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? [38] And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? [39] And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' [40] And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'*

We are not only going to minister to one another's brothers and sisters but we're going to minister for Christ's sake to one another, in Christ and for Christ, not only to stand firm but to step up and love each other in the Lord. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. Thank You for this text that sets up a framework for us. Father, we're emotionally pulled at moments like this but we want to be Biblically directed. Give us a family ministry to the persecuted brothers and sisters, those under dislocation, incarceration, and those suffering under torture in attempts of annihilation. Help us to remember them, to identify with them, to sense where they are hurting, to feel it in our own self and help us to pray for them as we minister to them. Thank You for the mission team and how they will lead us in this. God please bring us into this battle for Christ's sake, Amen.

Power Point

An Overview

A Closer View

Life Takeaway

Because of our love for Christ and His Church, we will knowingly, thoughtfully, sacrificially and prayerfully seek to personally and corporately encourage, embrace, and uphold our brothers and sisters as they stand firm for Christ.