

XVIII. Timeless Truth for Timely Topics in Biblical Perspective

What Does the Bible Say?

“Our Ministry to the Persecuted Church, Part II”

Hebrews 13:1–3

Dr. Harry L. Reeder III

November 22, 2015 – Morning sermon

This is the second study in Hebrews 13. I want to start by reading in Revelation 6. This has to do with the seven seals that only Jesus is worthy to open and they all unfold what is happening between the ascension of Jesus and the second coming. Here is what the fifth seal allows us to see in heaven now as Christ has ascended and the Gospel is going throughout all the world. Revelation 6:9–11 says [9] *When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. [10] They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” [11] Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.* The grass withers, the flower fades, God’s Word abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

In the last study we tried to give a Biblical framework to the enhancement, enlargement and expansion of our ministry to the persecuted church. We are using a passage that the writer to Hebrews gives us this very specific framework. We know we’re drawn to this emotionally but we don’t want to walk into this just emotionally for we want the Word of God to guide us as to how we reach out to the persecuted church. Hebrews 13:1–3 gives us our foundational guideline in our ministry to the persecuted church throughout the world. We get to this in just a moment to review and get a couple of thought as we come to the Lord’s Supper.

If we’ve already had a ministry to the persecuted church then why are we taking the time to revisit the Scripture and enhance, enlarge and expand that ministry? You are living in an age of an unprecedented persecution of the Christian church. That includes the Reformation, the 18th century and the first century, in intensity and scope. One pastor did some research and I know his research is valid. Over the last couple of decades, this is an average but is now intensifying beyond the average, those who have sealed their profession of faith in Jesus Christ with their own blood and own lives and in Revelation that day of Judgment will not come until all whom He has appointed bear witness of Him unto death, to seal it with your life breath, yet there are more who will give their lives for Jesus Christ. Today the numbers are unprecedented in all of church history although persecution has been consistent since the Old Covenant. Each year we average over 165,000 of your brothers and sisters are being killed for their faith in Christ. That is about one every three minutes and by the time we finish this worship service somewhere up to twenty will have died. By the time this day is through close to 500 will have sealed their testimony with their life and that is continuing to occur.

While that moves me emotionally I want to move Biblically so how do we minister to men and women in that situation? Before I read Hebrews 13 you need to remember that it doesn’t take place in a void. The persecution of God’s covenant people was in the Old Testament anticipating the coming of Christ. It was in the New Testament after the coming of Christ and you can see this in the book of Acts. Every time you see the Gospel move to a city there is the strike back of persecution. Church history is littered with it and it always has a

specific flow to it. I want to set this up by looking at Hebrews 11 which is very familiar to many because it is the chapter of faith. In it, it tells you about our Christian lives. You live by faith and then you die in faith so beginning in Hebrews 11 we see those who are saved by grace and live by grace in Jesus Christ. Then the writer gets to the end of the chapter and gives his summation.

Hebrews 11:32–40 says [32] *And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—[33] who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, [34] quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. [35] Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. [36] Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. [37] They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—[38] of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.*

[39] *And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, [40] since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.* Some win by winning and some win by losing in the midst of persecution. Here people on that side of Christ who had to die for their belief in the promises that would lead to Christ and they died even before Christ came. Now we're on the other side of Christ and we also follow the same train of the martyrs where God has called all of us to give our life to Christ and some of us will have to confess Him unto death by those who would put us to death because we confess Christ. The world is not worthy of such.

Then the writer makes this point that when God's people are targeted with persecution there are always three steps – dislocation into refugee status, incarceration and then mutilation and annihilation. So it is no wonder that when you get to Hebrews 13 you see this admonition. Hebrews 13 contains ten ministry admonitions and the first one is in Hebrews 13:1 with three applications that we looked at in the last study.

Hebrews 13:1–3 says [1] *Let brotherly love continue. [2] Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. [3] Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.* The idea of verse 1 is to keep it going with development, keep expanding it and keep it moving. Then he gives three takeaways from that day and age when the Hebrew Christians were under persecution.

The first application is to give refuge to strangers and obviously back then they would think of Abraham when Abraham opened up his tent and fed three strangers. He was not only entertaining two angels but also a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ. So here is a perspective of motivation for us. You will see in your Bible that strangers and aliens go together. When God's people follow Him many times they get dislocated from family and home. So what do we do with those who need a refuge? Our priority is to reach out and minister to them but that's not where we stop. For more information on our current refugee problem you can visit our website at the pastor's blog but the principle for us is we who have fled to Jesus for refuge should be ready to provide a refuge for God's people when they have been dislocated for the sake of the Gospel. We need to be ready because there is going to be more of it that is coming.

Secondly, we are to remember those in prison though we are in prison with them. To remember is to gain knowledge for appropriate action. Get information that is designed to give you direction as to how to help them. It is like the thief on the cross who said to Jesus “Lord remember me when you come into heaven.” It is not just put me on the list but to know me intimately and welcome me into Your presence for I am putting my trust in You. There is also the command that says to remember the Sabbath. That is to get the knowledge you need to know how to act upon the day of rest and how the Lord would have us live. So learn how to remember for action. Vicariously live with them in prison so you can relate to them for if you were dislocated or isolated from your family or home and incarcerated. Earlier I gave you the number of those persecuted who die but the number in prison is even greater. How many now have limbs that have been severed or have gone to meet Christ decapitated or have been wrenched away from a family or have been assaulted sexually or sold into the slave trade? It is unprecedented numbers.

We have a couple of choices. One we can just get overwhelmed with it and give up or try to deny it. Or two we can remember and get informed for the purpose of action. What would you want someone to do for you if you were in that prison? Here is what Paul says in II Timothy 4 where everyone had left him except Luke.

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.*

You can just hear Paul’s heart here but he didn’t want the Lord to hold it against them. He wanted someone to bring him a cloak, some books and the Scriptures. You see that need that is there. Remember those in prison with a purpose to know for an appropriate action.

Thirdly, we are to remember those who are mistreated for we are in the body of Christ also. Think of those whose appetites are now being used against them. They are being denied food and drink. They are being wrenched away from the intimacy of a marriage. There are the raw nerve endings as they are whipped, tortured and mutilated. Know this is happening all over so don’t put your head in the sand. Don’t just know what is happening to get hardened against it but know what is happening in order to respond to it. Those who are being persecuted, their stories are not unique for it has happened millions of times to many.

So how should we minister to those brothers and sisters? I want to finish with this takeaway and this takeaway is my attempt to answer one question as we move ahead into this ministry to the persecuted church. This is actually two questions put into one. Here it is. Why has religious persecution historically been predominately focused upon Christianity and why an unprecedented persecution of Christians today? Other religions have been persecuted but nothing like Christianity, for it is not even debatable. I want to give you a couple of answers to this question and I think there are five reasons why this is happening.

One, is that persecution is one of Satan's three schemes, one of his go-to strategies. He does this insistently, incessantly and has been doing this since the Garden as he continues it today. Are his strategies effective? Yes and no. Even with the little bit of targeting happening to Christians today, you can watch churches go silent lest they be mocked, much less incarcerated. Watch churches start compromising the message. So yes it does work to some degree but it doesn't work ultimately because almost always with persecution comes an expansion of the Kingdom. So if it only works partially and on pretty much those whom he already has then why does Satan keep doing it? Have you heard the saying 'behavior betrays your heart' or 'if you watch long enough what we say and do will tell you what our nature is'? If you're born again it will show out and if you're not born again that will show up. Satan does this because it is his nature. He is a murderer from the beginning. He is a liar.

The second reason is because the content of the Gospel message evokes persecution against Christians. The Gospel message is that you can't save yourself and you're a sinner and need a Savior. God loves you so much that He gave His Son who went to the cross to die for you and that's why we're coming to the Table to remember that today and give Him praise and glory. Your religion also can't save you but God can through His Son Jesus Christ who is The Way, The Truth and The Life and no man can come to the Father but through Him. Of necessity you need a Savior and of exclusivity there is only One and that is Jesus Christ. Unless God gives you eyes to see and ears to hear that message becomes a scandal and if you don't want to hear that message then you want to reject that message. If you want to reject that message then finally you don't want to hear that message for you want to suppress that message. The best way to suppress that message that you're rejecting is to kill the messengers. That is the line of thinking.

The third reason is that we're in an era of unprecedented expansion. I am so optimistic about the work of the Gospel around the world and so concerned about it in my own country but it's unbelievable what is happening all around the world like in Asia. If were in an unprecedented era of Gospel expansion then it stands to reason if Satan strikes back then were going to have an era of unprecedented persecution at the same time. That is the reflex of Satan. You can see this in the book of Acts for every time the Gospel goes to a city there is success and then Satan comes back with persecution, usually trying to stop the messengers of that Gospel.

Fourthly, the Bible tells us this is going to happen increasingly and will intensify toward the coming of Christ. His return is getting closer. Persecution is not the sign of His coming but it's one of the birth pangs that tell us His coming is getting closer. This thing is about to get delivered through the coming of Christ into a new heavens and a new earth.

The fifth reason why is because this is God's sovereign plan. God has ordained it. Satan is God's Satan and with persecution God is using all of this to bless us and exalt the glory of the Triune God. So persecution is a blessing from God? Absolutely. I believe like my forefathers that free speech is an unalienable right from God like freedom of assembly and freedom of religion as well. Freedom of speech, religion and assembly are all under attack but they are and always have been by states for we have just been in a wonderful providential blessing through the effect of other Christians that came before us. But as much as I believe freedom of religion is an unalienable right of God, it is not a promise from God. Nowhere in the Bible does God promise me freedom of religion but He does promise me persecution and all of God's promises are yes and amen in Jesus Christ.

Jesus says in John 15:18-21, [18] *"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. [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. [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. [21] But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me."

More than that persecution is a gift of God by His 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.* So God has made a promise of persecution and said it is a gift of His grace. God even says it's a blessing. Matthew 5:11–12 says [11] *"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. [12] Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*

So how can this be a promise, a gift of grace and a blessing? There are a couple of reasons how this can be. Number one, with persecution comes the refinement of the believer. James 1:2–4 says [2] *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, [3] for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. [4] And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.* That is why Peter says in I Peter 4:12–14, [12] *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. [13] But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. [14] If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.* God is refining His church and His people and this is when we grow as believers.

A second reason why it's a blessing is because it gives a chance to hear and experience God's Word. Matthew 10:19–20 says [19] *When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. [20] For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.* The Lord through His Spirit will give you power, wisdom and peace in those moments. He will be with us.

A third reason is when believers die for Christ we get a chance to be reminded that basically you will die the way you live. So when I see believers dying for Christ I know that something has been going on in their life. So since I'm going to die the way I live the martyr is a reminder to me to start living the way I want to die. Philippians 1:29 says [21] *For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*

A fourth reason is that persecution gives us an unparalleled opportunity for evangelism and discipleship. Check church history and the Bible for when persecution comes the Kingdom just takes off.

Fifthly, it gives us a chance to be a family, an opportunity to love one another. Let brotherly love continue. Our home becomes a refuge. Our resources are available. We won't let you be in prison alone like Paul. We're going to come or if we can get someone else to you then we'll get to you. We're going to get you what you need. We're going to be with you. When you stand we're ready to stand with you – standing firm and standing forth for Jesus Christ. We are going to find a way to do that but now we get to go to the Lord's Supper.

Why is this so important? We can't love our brothers and sisters out there if we do not love one another right here. To let brotherly love continue means it ought to be right here. Praise the Lord when you sit down with your family at Thanksgiving but we are sitting down together at a meal with our family right now, at this Table. Praise the Lord and let's refocus our

hearts on Jesus right here and now. The Bible says we're waiting for one another. Come to the Table of the Lord with the family to rejoice in the Lord. Let brotherly love continue. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we can be in this Word with You and at this Table with You. Come and minister to us, Father and care for us that we might rejoice in Jesus, be refined and that we might reach out so that we can be a refuge to the persecuted brothers and sisters. We can remember them acting appropriately, corporately and personally for those in prison, those being mistreated and tortured but Father, right here teach us to love one another that from here we'll love our brothers and sisters there. Teach us to love one another because of Your love for us displayed at this Table, in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Power Point

LIFE TAKEAWAY

Why has religious persecution historically been predominately focused upon Christianity and why an unprecedented persecution of Christians today?