Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Persecution and Endurance of Christians, Part 1
Scripture: Luke 21:12-19
Code: 42-257

We have had an unusual week here in Southern California, as you know, and yet it's not something unexpected. We have had our lives dominated this past week by the horrific fire storms that have torched Southern California. The combination with which we are very family, severe drought, dry brush, excessive heat, dry Santa Ana winds with gusts up to 100 miles an hour, fallen power lines, and a few crazy arsonists have engulfed our communities in an inferno that has for a while, at least, put a million people out of their homes...the largest mass evacuation of people in the history of the state of California.

We are all fully aware of the terrible danger of wind and fire in our community. We see it with our own eyes and have friends who even lost their homes in these fires last week. But fire is not new. We've seen it before here in Southern California, the world has seen it throughout all of its history, really. In fact, the world has a long history of fire. Though we can't do without fire, even the ancient world was dependent on fire for warmth, dependent on fire for cooking, fire could also destroy and fire can also kill.

Just in the last few hundred years, there have been some severely devastating fires even in our own country. In 1846, a period of twenty years of fires in the state of Oregon burned about two million acres of forest there. Eighteen-seventy one, a very famous fire took place in Wisconsin, it burned 1.2 million acres and it started the same day as the famous Chicago fire which burned down the city of Chicago to the ground and thousands were consumed in that fire.

This year in our own United States there have been massive fires in Georgia, Florida, Utah, Idaho, more in California burning at least two million acres of brush. And you can throw in fires from Australia and Poland and Greece and Italy and France and Spain and Portugal and Bolivia and Brazil and particularly in Indonesia. Over the last 25 years there have been some amazing fires in Indonesia. In 1982 and ‘83, one fire in Indonesia burned nine million acres of forest. A lot of lives were lost in 1997 and ‘98, another part of Indonesia east Samatra(?), 24 million acres consumed in a fire. In fact, some scientists calculated 2.6 giga-tons of carbon dioxide unleashed into the atmosphere out of that fire.
And we all know about city fires through history. Amsterdam has burned, London, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Washington D.C., Rome, Philadelphia, Canton, China, Santiago, Chili, Moscow, Montreal, Tokyo, New York, Detroit, Pittsburgh, we don't think of the Pittsburgh fire, that was in 1845, one thousand buildings burned to the ground in Pittsburgh, Boston, Vancouver, Seattle, Shanghai.

One of the most amazing fires that I've ever been made aware of on my several visits to Nova Scotia was the fire that ensured in the harbor of Halifax, the capital of Nova Scotia, when the largest explosion pre-atomic bomb in the history of the world took place, a munitions ship sitting in the harbor exploded and literally set the entire city on fire, volcanic fires, fires from incendiary devices and bombs, fires from atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Deadly fires have been long a part of human life.

And in a more primitive time in the world, fire was a very real danger for those people who lived in structures that were flammable and most of them did. But the fires that we have seen, the fires that we will see, are really just a preview of the fires that are going to come into this world in the future because just prior to the time when the Lord Jesus returns, this world is going to experience some fires the likes of which they will not be able to comprehend. Revelation chapter 8 takes us forward to the period of the Tribulation just before Jesus returns to judge and to reign...to judge sinners and to establish His Kingdom for His saints, just prior to His coming judgment will be unleashed on this world. One of the forms of that divine judgment will be fire.

Revelation chapter 8 verse 6, “The seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound them.” These are angels and each blows a trumpet and the blowing of that trumpet unleashes a judgment. “The first,” in verse 7, “sounded, there came hail and fire mixed with blood. They were thrown to the earth, a third of the earth was burned up and a third of the trees were burned up and all the green grass was burned up. And the second angel sounded and something like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea and a third of the sea became blood, a third of the creatures in the sea and had life died, a third of the ships were destroyed. Third angel sounded, a great star fell from heaven burning like a torch, fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. The name of the star is wormwood, a third of the waters became wormwood, many men died from the waters because they were made bitter.”

And so, fire will come and consume the grass, a third of the green plants, and even pollute the sea and pollute the fresh water. In the ninth chapter of the book of Revelation and verse 17, the end of the verse mentions fire, smoke and brimstone. A third, verse 18 says, of mankind was killed by these three plagues, by the fire, and the smoke, and the brimstone. A third of the plants, a third of the trees, and now a third of the population of the earth destroyed by fire.

In the fourteenth chapter of the book of Revelation, there is a judgment that comes from an angel and verse 18 introduces that angel to us with these words, “And another angel, the one who has power over fire.” Fire is so much a part of judgment that there is a super angel who is in charge of fire to be dispensed in divine judgment.

Chapter 16 and verse 8, here are more angels, not trumpets this time but bowl judgments. And in chapter 16 verse 8, “The fourth angel poured out his bowl upon the sun and it was given to it to

scorch men with fire and men were scorched with fierce heat and they blasphemed the name of God who has the power over these plagues and they did not repent so as to give Him glory." God has power over the fire. God has assigned angels to dispense that fire to this earth. And that will even include the sun becoming a source of fierce heat that sets people, as it were, on fire.

In the nineteenth chapter of the book of Revelation and verse 19, at the time when the nations of the world gather to fight against the saints, gather to fight against Christ, it says in verse 19 of chapter 19, "I saw the beast, the kings of the earth, their armies assembled to make war against Him who sat on the horse...meaning Christ...against His army...those are the saints...the beast was seized with him, the false prophet who performed the signs in his presence by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. These two were thrown alive into the Lake of Fire which burns with brimstone." This is the fire of eternal hell.

The twentieth chapter and the tenth verse, "The devil who deceived them was thrown into the Lake of Fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are and they'll be tormented day and night forever and ever." Verse 15, "If anyone's name was not found written in the Book of Life, he was thrown into the Lake of Fire." Fire has a very prominent place in the future. In the future of this earth, God literally will torch this planet so that one third of its plant life is destroyed and one third of its population is destroyed by fire. And even hell is described as a Lake of Fire. Fire has played a deadly role in the history of humanity. It continues to escalate and escalate and escalate and it will find its final form in those future days of Tribulation that I just read you, when the Lord unleashes fire as a part of His divine judgment in a deadly way, way beyond anything imagined, just before the return of Jesus Christ.

Should we be surprised by this? No, because this is exactly what Jesus said life would be like. Let's go back to Luke 21...Luke 21. And as we go back to Luke 21, we are sitting on the slope of the Mount of Olives with Jesus and His disciples. And He is telling them about the future, telling them about the future. He is telling them what to expect. They are asking Him, "When are You going to establish Your Kingdom?" When is going to become the end of this age and the beginning of the glorious golden age? When are You going to take Your power? And what should we be looking for as a sign that this is going to happen?

Mark 13:3 and 4 actually tells us that four disciples posed these questions; Peter, James, John and Andrew. They posed them on behalf of the rest. But they all wanted to know. Jesus had just walked out of the temple for the last time, never to return again until He comes in glory in the future. He turned around with them, they looked at the temple, Jesus said, "This temple is coming down, not one stone will remain on top of another stone." Forty years later that's exactly what happened. And they tore down every stone because the Romans came in 70 A.D., set the temple on fire, consequently the gold that was all over the walls melted and ran down into the cracks of the stone. And in order to dig out all the gold, they took every stone apart. Jesus said it would happen that way, that's exactly what

happened forty years after this, no one can know the future, not 40 years into the future but God Himself. And if He knows the future in 40 years, believe me, He knows the future in thousands of years just as well. No man even knows what tomorrow will bring. He knew. He said in verse 6, “These things you're looking at, the day will come when there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn down.” He was right, 40 years later that's exactly what happened. And, folks, Jesus said that because He wanted us to know that what He says about the future is exactly the way it will be. And that was the proof. He was dead right about that, 40 years later. You can trust Him for the whole future. If He tells you it's going to happen, believe me, it will happen and you have proof that He knows the future.

So starting then in verse 8, He begins to describe for them what the future will be like before He comes. The highpoint of this...this lesson that He gives through the whole 21st chapter is in verse 27. And in verse 27 He says, “The Son of Man is coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” Yes He is coming. Yes He is coming in power and great glory. But before He comes there are some things this world must experience. So you have the promise of His coming in verses 24 to 28. You have the preliminaries to His coming in verses 7 through 24 I should say...we're looking at the preliminaries to His coming in verses 7 through 24.

What is life going to be like before Jesus comes? And here is His description of it. First of all, we have learned there will be deceivers, verse 8. He said, “See to it that you be not misled for many will come in My name saying I am He and the time is at hand. Do not go after them.” Religious deception will abound. It will grow, as we already learned. It will flourish. It will escalate. It will enlarge. It will engulf the world so that while the true church grows, while true Christianity flourishes, while the Lord builds His church and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it, while the true seed is bearing fruit in the true church, there will grow a false form of Christianity out of all proportion that will be far larger than the real thing. The deception in the name of Christianity will flourish. False Messiahs, false Christs, false teachers, false prophets, false forms of Christianity as well as false forms of every other kind of religion, expect it and we have seen it.

Secondly, disasters will come. Disasters...verse 9, “When you hear of wars and disturbances, do not be terrified for these things must take place first. But the end does not follow immediately.” There's the indication that there's going to be some events that happen before the end when He comes to judge and to reign. Namely war and disturbances. What did He mean by that? Verse 10, “He continued by saying to them, ‘Nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom.'” That defines the wars.

Disturbances are defined this way. Verse 11, “There will be great earthquakes and in various places plagues and famines.” There will be terrors and great signs from heaven into which category you can put wind and fire...wind and fire. We're not surprised...we're not surprised at all because we expect these kinds of things to happen because Jesus said they would happen. Things from the sky like the

wind, terrors like fire torching cities and lands and people. Jesus said expect this, don't expect things to get better, don't expect the world to get better. Don't expect to be delivered from all the difficulties of life, it's going to get worse and worse and worse because evil men get worse and worse and worse. The consequences of sin get worse and worse. And this is a scarred, stained, cursed planet groaning for its redemption and suffering the consequences of the Fall. Expect then deception, expect disaster.

Human life will also in a very particular way be defined by a third component...distress, and in particular distress of Christian believers by persecution. Distress of Christian believers by persecution, look at verse 12. And I believe this would have been the hardest thing for them to comprehend. But before all these things, before nations start making war with other nations, before kingdoms start taking on kingdoms and you have wars stretching across the globe, before massive earthquakes, great plagues, great famines, terrors from the sky, all of these kinds of things, before that...in other words, most immediately this is what will happen. “They will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My namesake.” Persecution of the disciples of Christ. That very group to whom He was speaking, which certainly included the Twelve and perhaps some others who were true followers of Jesus, the first thing that's going to happen is the opposite of what you would expect. This is so shocking to them. Wars are one thing, they're sort of outside of us...plagues and famines and earthquakes and fires and hurricanes and tornados and volcanos and all those other cataclysms of earthly life are outside of us. They could understand that that could be a reality because that had already been a reality. But persecution? Their whole theology said when the Messiah comes with the coming of Messiah comes the golden age. Even after hearing Jesus say this, they couldn't swallow it because they went right from here into discussions about which of them was going to be the greatest in the Kingdom. Which of them again, the same old deal, is going to sit on His right hand and on His left hand, this was all about their glory, this was all about the golden age when God was going to exalt Israel and when the Messiah would certainly exalt those who believed in Him, when they would be lifted into prominence and influence and power, when they would have the fulfillment of all their expectations and everything the Old Testament prophets had predicted.

Persecution? This was just absolutely opposite anything they would have imagined. Before any of this other begins to really do its damage, you're going to be persecuted. In fact, specifically they will lay their hands on you. That's arrest language. They will arrest you and they will having arrested you, deliver you to the synagogues for trial and then put you in prison. That's the form of persecution. Synagogues, by the way, contained the Jewish local courts. In every village, in ever town there were synagogues. In those synagogues was the dispensing of local justice both criminal and civil. Twenty-three judges usually were required to sit and adjudicate on the cases that were brought to the synagogue court.

To be brought, by the way, before that court was considered a severe discrediting and indignity. The court would listen to the case, the court would make a decision, that is the judge would render his verdict, and punishment was executed immediately on the spot. Generally speaking, since the Romans had not allowed the Jews to have the right of capital punishment, the Jews would have to do something to punish people short of stoning them to death, and so they would scourge them with whips, the way Jesus was scourged, in fact, by the Romans was the typical way the Jews scourged the guilty. One judge would recite an appropriate Psalm, or Old Testament text, that had something to do with the crime committed. The second would count the blows. And a third would command the blows and a servant of the synagogue, he was called, would deliver the blows and they would come immediately upon the adjudication and in full public view.

In the case of these believers, they would not only be scourged, but they would be put in prison. This is just more than they could possibly process. Now remember, they expected Jesus to conquer the Romans, not to be crucified by the Romans. They expected Jesus to be received by the Jews and exalted as Messiah, not to be hated by the Jewish leaders who plotted His death with the Romans. They expected the Messiah to capture the whole nation of people, not to be rejected by the whole nation of people. To process that Jesus is rejected by the people and by the leaders, to process that He has not developed an army, that He's not going to conquer the Romans, that He's not going to establish His power and His throne, but rather that He keeps talking about dying and leaving...this is more than they could handle. In fact, it was so hard for them to handle that even after He died and rose and spent days teaching them, before He ascended, they said in Acts 2, “Will You at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?” They did not see a gap before a first and second coming, they saw everything the Messiah was going to do happening at the time He came and He came once. And now they hear, not only are we not going to sit on His right hand and left hand, there isn't going to be any Kingdom now. Not only are we not going to be exalted and elevated and given positions of power and influence, we're going to be persecuted. This is absolutely antithetical to anything they would have imagined. Contrary to all their thoughts. Jesus said it's going to happen and it's going to happen at the hands of the Jews.

How do you know that? Because, He says they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and then from there to the prisons. And they had prisons. This is Jewish persecution of the followers of Jesus. Not only that though, there will be Gentile persecutions. They will also be bringing you before kings and governors. There was no king and no governor in the Jewish social structure. The kings were Herods, they were Idumaeans, they were non-Jews. And the governors were Romans. So now you have not only the promise of Jewish persecution, but of Gentile persecution, the whole world is going to gang up on you.

And that is certainly what happened. If you go in to the book of Acts, it doesn't take you very long to find out that the persecution breaks out immediately in the book of Acts and it comes from the Jews. It starts in chapter 3, you see it in 4, 5, 8, 12, 13, 14, 21, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, persecution by the Jews, of

Christians. And as you keep reading in the book of Acts, you see the gospel extend, chapter 13, toward the Gentiles. Gentile persecution starts to break out. You see it in chapter 16, 17, 18, 21, 24, 25, 26. The whole world gangs up on them. It is exactly as Jesus said it would be. He said expect to be persecuted, you will be persecuted by Jews and Gentiles.

Why? End of verse 12, “For My namesake.” They persecute you because they hate Me. They persecute you because they hate Me. That's the issue. It isn't that Christians are unkind, unlovable, not nice. It's what they represent that the unregenerate Jews and Gentiles hate. They represent the gospel which indicts all these as sinners on their way to hell who need to repent and believe in Jesus Christ, and that's the only way to be saved. They hate that message. They hate the Christ of the gospel.

So they have to be scratching their heads and saying, “This is not according to the plan.” But Jesus gives them hope in verse 13. And He says this, “It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony....it will lead to an opportunity for your testimony.” I love that. It's going to open up the door for you to take the gospel everywhere. You remember what Paul said in Philippians chapter 1, that since he was a prisoner the gospel was furthered by his chains? And even brought into Caesar's household so that he had led some in Caesar's household to the knowledge of the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. The persecution of the church always brings gospel opportunity, persecution of the church always purifies the church. The persecution of the church always makes the church strong, it makes the church bold.

And a parallel passage, and remember now, Luke 21, teaching of Jesus here, is part of what He said, the rest of what He said is contained in Matthew 24 and Mark 13, combine all of those. But in Matthew 24:14, this Jesus said as well on this same occasion, “This gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations then the end shall come.”

Before the end comes, the gospel is going to go to the end of the world. Well they might have wondered how that could happen. How could that possibly happen? How could it possibly happen that the gospel could go to the end of the world when we're going to be arrested, imprisoned and killed? That's only part of the story. It's going to create opportunity for your testimony. Persecution of Christians has allowed Christians to give, strong, bold, confident, faithful testimony to the glory of the gospel. You read Foxe's Book of Martyrs, I've been reading it my whole life, just pieces and bits, and pieces, and over and over again. And you hear these incredibly stirring, beautiful testimonies of those who were brought to the edge of the flames, about to be burned to death, or to the edge of the sword, the guillotine for their love for Christ and how powerful their testimony is now resounding.

And so, in verse 14 the Lord says, “Make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves. Don't worry about this. Don't think you've got to...this is literally technical language in the Greek for preparing and rehearsing a speech. Don't do that. Make up your minds not to literally beforehand practice what you're going to say. No need. Why? Because, verse 15, “I will give you

utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute." I will give you what to say.

This isn't the first time the Lord told them that. This is not the first time the Lord told them they're going to be persecuted. But it was so hard for them to grasp, even though He said it again and again. Going way back into Matthew chapter 10, way back, in the early part of His ministry He said this to them in verse 17 of Matthew 10, "Beware of men, they will deliver you up to the courts and scourge you in their synagogues, and you shall even be brought before governors and kings for My sake." Same thing, Jewish persecution and Gentile persecution. "As a testimony to them and to the Gentiles." Verse 19, "But when they deliver you up, do not become anxious about how or what you will speak, for it shall be given you in that hour what you are to speak, for it is not you who speak, it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you." Wow, what a promise. Don't worry, don't be fearful. Don't wonder whether you'll be able to say the right thing in that hour, in that moment.

I remember reading some of the literature down around the time of John Calvin. And there were young ministers writing John Calvin passionate letters, pleading with him to teach them what to say when they had to stand before the martyrs guillotine. And what did Calvin need to teach them to say? Nothing, but to depend upon the promise of God who said, "In that hour the Spirit will tell you what to say."

In Mark 13:11, "When they arrest you and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand about what you are to say but say whatever is given you in that hour for it is not you who speak but it is the Holy Spirit."

Again, much earlier in the Lord's ministry, in Luke 12, verses 11 and 12, Luke 12 verses 11 and 12, "When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not become anxious about how or what you should speak in your defense or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say." That is so clear. There is nothing ambiguous about that. Don't worry about it. You're going to be persecuted. That's right, you're going to be persecuted. It will give you an opportunity to give a testimony to the gospel, to make a good confession of the gospel and your faith in Christ. Don't worry about what you're going to say, the Holy Spirit who dwells within you will show you what to say. And in such a way that none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute you.

You can go through the book of Acts and you can see illustrations of this, how that when they were brought before the authorities they said exactly the right thing, for which the authorities had no response. Even in my little world, I have rested on this promise. I get myself in situations where I'm under fire from people who hate the gospel, sometimes on worldwide television. And people ask me, "How do you prepare for that?" And I have always said this, "I prepare for that by simply trusting in the Holy Spirit." I'm actually excited, it's an adventure. I'm eager to find out what I'm going to say. And

sometimes I'll replay it and I'll say, “Wow, that was pretty good.” But they're never a match for the truth. They're never a match for the truth.

Yes, on the world stage there will come relentless persecution. Don't worry, it's going to come. You need to know it's going to come because that will insulate you against it. You don't need to be surprised by this.

Now He's already told them way back as we read in Matthew 10 and Luke 12. But let me show you John 14. John 14 is Jesus with His disciples the next night. This is Wednesday when He's on the Mount of Olives talking about His Second Coming. The next night is Thursday. He's in the upper room, He's having Passover with His disciples, this is one day later. And in John 14:29 He is talking to them, all through this section, from the thirteenth chapter on, but look what He says in 29. “I have told you before it come to pass that when it comes to pass you may believe.”

So what He's doing is telling them to expect persecution so when persecution comes they won't be surprised and say, “Hey, this whole thing's gone south on us.” Chapter 15, drop down to verse 19...well, verse 18, “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. This is one night later He's telling them this. “If you're of the world, the world would love its own. You're not of the world, but I chose you out of the world therefore the world hates You.” Remember the word that I said to you. A slave is not greater than his master, if they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also.” I'm telling you this.

Now go down to chapter 16 verse 1, and He says why. “These things I've spoken to you that you may not be...that you may be kept from stumbling. These things I've spoken to you that you may be kept from stumbling.” I don't want you to falter and fail when persecution comes because you didn't expect it.

Verse 2, “They will make you outcasts from the synagogue but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he's offering service to God.” The Jewish persecution will come and they will think they're serving God in persecuting you. “These things they will do because they have not known the Father or Me.” The Jews not only do not know the Son, they do not know the Father either.

Then verse 4 is the key verse. John 16:4, “These things I've spoken to you that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you of them and these things I didn't say to you at the beginning because I was with you.” As long as I was with you, I took the heat. As long as I was with you, I took the fury. As long as I was with you, I took the animosity. When I'm gone, it's coming to you and you need to know it...you need to know it.

Now back to Luke. How intimate will this persecution be? Verse 16 of Luke 21, “You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends and they will put some of you to death and

you will be hated by all on account of My name." Everybody is going to hate you on account of My name, right down to your intimate circle of friends and family. You're not just going to be hated by the Gentiles, you're going to be hated by the Jews. You're not going to be hated by just the Jews, you're going to be hated by your own parents and your own brothers and sisters who resent the gospel. You're going to be hated by everyone because of My name, for My namesake, because you identify with Me.

I'm telling you this now so that when it comes you will remember that I told you and you won't stumble. Expect it. Expect it.

Is that the way it worked out? Was Jesus right? Well He was right about the wars, He was right about the earthquakes, He was right about the famines and the plagues. He was right about the terrors in the sky, the wind and the fire. He was right about all of those things. He was right about the destruction of the temple, not one stone upon another. You can go there today, stand there and you will not see two stones on top of each other where t he temple was. He was right about that.

Was He right about the persecution? Oh yeah. And did it come before anything else? Absolutely. From its inception on the Day of Pentecost, here's a little history, from its inception on the Day of Pentecost, the church of Jesus Christ began to face Jewish hostility. All you have to do is look at the church. The church starts in Acts 2. In Acts 3 Peter and John heal a man crippled from birth. In response to the healing, Peter preaches a powerful evangelistic sermon in Acts 3. And then we read this in Acts 4, "The priests, the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them, being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the children and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead and they laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day for it was already evening."

The church starts in chapter 2. Peter preaches his first sermon in chapter 3. They're put in jail in chapter 4. Before anything else could happen as exactly as Jesus had stated. Shortly after that, however, stung by the phenomenal growth of the church, three thousand on the Day of Pentecost and thousands more soon after, you come in to chapter 5, the next chapter in Acts, and what do you read? "The high priest rose up along with all of his associates, that is the sect of the Sadducees, filled with jealousy they laid hands on the Apostles and put them in a public jail." Just exactly what Jesus said would happen at the hands of the Jews. That's chapter 5.

You come to chapter 6, you meet Stephen, a servant in the church. Stephen is falsely accused. He is arrested by the Jews. He is put on trial before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council. And then he is, in chapter 7, stoned to death. After his death, you come to chapter 8. How does chapter 8 begin? With a general persecution breaking out against all Christians, spear-headed by none other than a man named Saul of Tarsus. The persecution begins and it spreads.

It finally reaches the Apostles in the twelfth chapter. The first of the Apostles to be martyred is James, the brother of John, and he is executed by the will of the Jews at the hands of Herod, chapter 12.

Soon after that, Peter, Andrew, Philip, James the son of Alphaeus, all crucified. Bartholomew whipped to death and then crucified. Thomas stabbed with spears. And these are the very men to whom Jesus said you will be hated, persecuted and killed. And they were.

Even outside that original circle of disciples, Mark was dragged to death through the streets of Alexandria. James, the half-brother of Jesus and the leader of the Jerusalem church, was stoned by order of the Sanhedrin. Matthew, Simon the Zealot, Thaddaeus and even Timothy were killed for their unwavering commitment to Jesus Christ. It was Clement of Rome, a contemporary of the Apostles, who died around 100 A.D. who observed this, quote: “Through envy and jealousy, the greatest and most righteous pillars of the church have been persecuted and executed.”

Jesus said it would happen and it happened. Jesus wasn't limiting this persecution just to them. He said it would start with them and it would continue. The Apostle Paul says, “All that live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.”

Turn to Paul. Before his execution, Paul encountered fierce opposition from the Jews primarily. His bold, fearless preaching of the gospel astonished and enraged the Jewish population in Damascus who then sought to kill him. He had to flee for his life. Acts chapter 9, he was lowered from the city wall at night in a basket. The incident really chartered the course for the rest of Paul's life. He was always on the run.

Luke records that in the course of his missionary journeys he was forced to flee from Iconium. He was pelted with stones and left for dead at Lystra. He was beaten and thrown into jail at Philippi. He was forced to leave Thessalonica after his preaching started a riot. He was forced to flee from Berea after hostile Jews from Thessalonica followed him there. He was mocked and ridiculed by Greek philosophers at Athens. He was brought before a Roman pro-consul at Corinth by his Jewish adversaries. And he faced hostility constantly from the Jews and the Gentiles at Ephesus. And that's Paul's life from Acts 14 to Acts 19.

As he was about to sail from Greece to Jerusalem, a Jewish plot against his life forced him to change his travel plans, and that's Acts 20. On the way to Jerusalem he met the elders of the Ephesian church and he said this to them, “I'm bound in Spirit on my way to Jerusalem not knowing what will happen to me there except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me that in every city that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city...in other words, the Spirit keeps repeating it...saying that chains and afflictions await me.” I don't know exactly what to expect when I get to Jerusalem except I'm going to become a prisoner.

When he finally arrived in Jerusalem, he was recognized, when he went to the temple, by Jews from Asia Minor who knew him. He was then savagely beaten by a frenzied mob. He would have been killed right there in the temple area except the Roman soldiers saw what was going on and saved him from a certain death. And they arrested him, and now you're in to Acts 21, they arrested him for his own safety.

While he was in custody in Jerusalem, under Roman guard, the Jews were plotting another plan to kill him, prompting the Roman commander to get him out of jail in Jerusalem under heavy guard, take him to the governor in Caesarea. And by then you're in Acts 23.

Eventually he has a harrowing sea voyage and shipwreck. In Roman custody he arrives in Rome. There, Acts 28, local Jewish opposition comes against him. They tracked him even to the end of the book of Acts because they hated Christ. The Romans released him after two years of imprisonment. Acts 28:30, eventually rearrested him and cut off his head under Nero's persecution.

This is the story of the Apostles. This is the story of the disciples, including the one added later, our beloved Paul. Jesus said it would be like this and this is the way it was. But under their ministry even in the midst of persecution, as they stood before kings and governors and councils and synagogues and proclaimed the glorious gospel, made a faithful confession, the gospel flourished, the testimony was clear. Their boldness made the message believable and people were converted to Christ. That's always the way it is with faithful Christian testimony under persecution.

The Jews, however, thought they were serving God. They thought they were honoring God. They considered Christians to be heretics. As I read you in John 16, “They will make you outcasts from the synagogue because they think they're offering service to God.” And some of the Jews, particularly the Sadducees and the people in power knew they had that power because they had managed to get into a relationship of complicity with the Romans. In other words, they politically got their power by condescending to Roman authority. They were afraid of Christianity because Christians put Jesus above Caesar and they thought if Christianity flourished, it would so irritate the Romans that they would lose their positions of power. So you had Jewish persecution coming from those who were politically motivated and Jewish persecution coming from those who were religiously motivated. But it was persecution, nonetheless.

Oh by the way, Jewish persecution ended when Judaism ended, 70 A.D. It was over. When the temple came down, when the city was destroyed, it was over. And Jewish organized persecution ended. But Gentile persecution was just getting started and it's still going on today. And I'm going to talk about that next time. We think about 160 thousand Christians are killed every year since 1990. This persecution will get worse...far worse in the time of Tribulation. We'll leave that for next time.

I want to give you one word of hope, look at verse 18. “Even though you will be hated by all on account of My name, yet not a hair of your head will perish.” You may die, but you're going to be okay. The worst that can happen to the believer is the best that can happen to the believer. Father, we thank You for Your truth. Thank You for the power of the words of our Lord and sometimes we read these words and they just kind of fly by and we don't grab their impact, but it's a stunning thing to see the accuracy with which Jesus knew the future. It was countered to everything they expected, even just lining up with the conventional wisdom of His day. He was saying things that were just beyond comprehension.

And they were right, everything He said was exactly the way it is in the world. Millions of believers have died since that original group, died at the hands primarily of the Jews and some Gentiles. Millions have died. And many more will. And even more saints will be slaughtered in the time of Tribulation by the Antichrist and his agents. But the church will still grow and flourish, according to Your plan. History is unfolding exactly the way You said it would.

And, Lord, we pray that we will be faithful, that when we get into situations with those who are hostile to the gospel, we might know that we are safe and secure, not one hair of head will be harmed. That's an idiomatic way of saying we're safe in the care of the One who has given us life eternal and we will never perish. But, Lord, help us in those situations to rest on the fact that You will give us what we need to say and You will allow us to make a bold confession no matter how trying it may be. We know that we live in a part of the world and a time in the world when we can be soft. We don't have a strong experience of persecution, not like so many in the world, not like Christians in Muslim countries and Hindu countries who are dying for their faith. Not like Christians who live under tyranny of Communism who are executed for their faith. We have a different environment for us. And we know that not all of us experience the great earthquakes and the famines and the plagues either but these are the general realities. But, Lord, we know that if and when those things come, even if it's just in our family or friends who condemn us, hate us, because of the gospel and because of Christ, that You will give us what we need to say, that can't be refuted or resisted and that You will give us opportunity to make a good confession, even as Jesus made a good confession before Pontius Pilate, even as Paul made a good confession as he stood before his executors, even as saints of the ages make that good confession, You will enable us in all things, all struggles to make that good confession, a true gospel confession and You will use our testimony to advance the gospel to the ends of the earth.

History is Your story, You are writing it. And we see it again unfold exactly the way You said it would. You are the true God, Christ is the true Redeemer and the true Savior who speaks to us the truth. We rest in that truth. We're not surprised, we're not shocked, we're not stunned. We don't falter and stumble in our faith because of persecution. You said to expect it and it has come. If they hated You, they will certainly hate us in Your name.

Father, we pray for those who are still a part of that kingdom of darkness, who are not under Your protection. We pray, Lord, that those who do not know Christ and forgiveness and salvation would receive that gift today.

Lord, we do know that it is a great joy to suffer for Your sake. Bring on that suffering for righteousness' sake, that produces joy and effective testimony. May we be bold and confident that the Spirit will give us what to say in that hour. We pray, Lord, that as Your true church moves ahead and feels the increasing hostility even of our culture, the chaff will fall away and the real grain will stand the test and have an impact for the gospel. These things we ask only for Your glory in Christ's name. Amen.

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