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

The Persecution and Endurance of Christians, Part 2
Scripture: Luke 21:12-19
Code: 42-258

We return in our study of the Word of God to the twenty-first chapter of Luke's gospel. Luke is the predominant historian of the New Testament, having written this gospel as well as the entire book of Acts. And, of course, the focus in Luke's writing is on the person and work of Jesus Christ and the spread of the gospel of Christ after His ascension and sending of the Holy Spirit.

But as we come to chapter 21 of Luke's gospel, let me just review for you where we are in the story of our Lord. It is Wednesday night, it is Wednesday night of Passion Week, the final week of our Lord's life and ministry before the cross. On Thursday, He will celebrate the Passover with His disciples. On Friday He will be crucified. And on Sunday He will rise from the dead. Following that, He will make appearances only to those who believe in Him, after which He ascends back to heaven to reign and to intercede. It is Wednesday of that final week.

On Monday, He came into the city. It is called His triumphal entry. He was hailed as potentially the Messiah although the same crowd that hailed Him as Messiah, by Friday are screaming for His blood...fickle, superficial and shallow.

It was Monday that He came into the city. It was Tuesday that He went into the temple and threw out the money changers for the second time in His ministry and said, “You have turned My Father's house, a house of prayer, into a cave of robbers.”

The next day, Wednesday, He came back to the temple, spent the whole day there teaching the crowds and being confronted by the leaders, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Herodians who tried to trap Him in His words so that they could have some reason to bring Him to the Romans for execution. He has managed to parry ever blow they thrust at Him. He ended His day in the twilight and walked out of that temple ground. Following Him were His own disciples. It was the last time He would ever set foot in that place until He comes again. And, in fact, when He comes again, His feet will land on the very Mount of Olives where He was sitting in the evening of that Wednesday, talking to His disciples about His Second Coming.

Everything looks grim. Everything looks disappointing. Everything looks as bad as it can get, even to the disciples. And yet they have a glimmer of trust and hope that somehow He is going to bring the Kingdom. And so, He sits with them on the side of the Mount of Olives, the western side, looking at the eastern wall and the temple mount and He speaks to them about His coming in glory and

judgment to reign.

What He tells them is it is not now, it is much later. He is going back to heaven and in the future, He will come again to fulfill all Kingdom promise and all judgment promise. They don't have that in their theology. Not two comings of Messiah, they thought it would all happen with one. Jesus makes clear the first time He comes to die, to provide the sacrifice for sin. The second time He comes to reign, to judge sinners and to reign with the saints.

And so, in this twenty-first chapter, Jesus speaks concerning His Second Coming. You might say this is Jesus own sermon on His Second Coming. The full text of what He said will be brought to your mind if you compare the thirteenth chapter of Mark and Matthew 24 and 25. But we're in Luke so we'll look at the Lucan text.

Whenever you talk about the Second Coming, whenever you talk about prophecy, there is among many people the assumption that you're dealing with something that is just frankly dark, mysterious, hidden, secret, obscure and maybe we shouldn't even spend much of our time dealing with it because it is so oblique, so hard to comprehend. Prophecy can be bizarre, I agree with that. It can be oblique, it can be esoteric, it can be made mysterious. But you have to work hard to do that because, frankly, the Bible is clear. I am one who believes that what the Bible says about the future is as clear as what it says about the present or the past, that what the Bible says about things to come is as clear as about what the Bible says regarding things that are.

And in order to understand its clarity, you must, first of all, assume its clarity. That's not a stretch, is it? Remember, the Bible is revelation, not mystery. It intends to end the darkness, to bring knowledge where there is ignorance. It is revelation, that is it reveals, it discloses, it opens up. That is its purpose. When Jesus talks about the future, it is so that we can understand the future, not be confused by it.

But there is a foundational interpretive principle that you have to bring to bear on prophetic literature in Scripture just like any other element of Scripture, and it is this, we must interpret Scripture beginning with this foundational principle, how would the original hearers of this truth have understood it? How would they have understood it? Because it is first and foremost a revelation to them which is then recorded for all the rest of us. It is intended to make clear the truth to those who heard it. And when it comes to prophetic text, as any other text, the truest interpretation will determine what the original hearers would have understood. And, frankly, while people have languished in confusion over this particular sermon of our Lord, I find it utterly unnecessary to do so, it is anything but obscure, it is anything but confusing, it is plain straightforward and simple if you just understand that He's talking to plain, straightforward, simple men.

When Jesus was speaking to the disciples, He was not speaking to the theological elite. He was speaking to fishermen, people working with their hands, uneducated, no rabbi, no scribe, no Pharisee, no one of any significance at all. They had a hard time believing almost anything He said, that's why He had to repeat it so many times. And even when they heard it, they couldn't quite trust in it and that's why Jesus identified them so often as “O you of little faith.” No matter what He said, they seemed to be confused by it. They were not elite theologians, they were not gifted with some unusual ability to grapple with deep things. They were just plain people understanding things in a very plain way. In fact, the whole Bible was written for plain people.

You can make prophecy bizarre. Many people have worked hard to do it. You can make it esoteric, mysterious. And you can invent interpretations of prophecy that would have been inconceivable and incomprehensible to the mind of the disciples. And if they couldn't get it, then it's got to be the wrong interpretation. Because this was said to them. So here we join Jesus and His disciples again. And we feel at home because we're a lot like them. He speaks to them concerning the future. And He tells them in this sermon, in Luke 21, that He is coming again. That's in verses 25 to 28, that's kind of the high point of the sermon. In fact, you remember I pointed that out to you last time that in verse 27 He says you will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud and great glory. And He's referring to His Second Coming. So He does promise them that He's coming.

But He's also...and He's already said this several times. He also promises them that there's going to be an intervening time before He comes. And He explains to them what is going to happen in the world during that time. He says He's coming, that's verses 25 to 28. But He says in the preliminary time, before He comes, there are going to be things that will happen and He lays them out specifically. These are preliminary to His coming and they go from verse 8 through verse 19.

Then in verses 20 to 24, an event that's going to happen right before He comes. So you've got the promise of His coming in the middle. You've got the preliminaries to His coming. And then starting in verse 29 to the end of the chapter, you have the preparation for His coming. So this is a very well thought out and well crafted presentation by Luke of Jesus' teaching.

Now we're looking at the preliminaries to His coming. Let's pick up our Lord's words in 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. And 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.” And He continued by saying to them, “Nation will rise against nation and Kingdom against Kingdom, there will be great earthquakes, and in various places plagues and famines. There will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all these things, 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. It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony. So make up your minds to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves, for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to

resist or refute. But 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. Yet not a hair of your head will perish, by your endurance, you will gain your lives."

Now the disciples had a very, very sort of well-defined eschatology that they were familiar with because it was the current eschatology of the Judaism of their day. They had hopes and expectations of the arrival of Messiah. In fact, that was the brightest hope in the heart of any Jew. And what did they expect? Well I have told you in the past, let me just give you a brief summary.

They had an intense interest in the Messiah's arrival to set up His Kingdom. And the Old Testament promised all kinds of elements in that Kingdom and they were aware of them, that Israel would be restored to prominence, freed from its enemies, its enemies would be punished by the arrival of Messiah who would set up the throne of David again and reign in Jerusalem. And there would be a transformation of the land itself, a river flowing out of Jerusalem to the east through the desert. The desert would blossom like a rose. It would change the nature of the world so that animals that were formerly enemies now became compatible and people would live long age. All kinds of things like that. They understand it would be dominated by righteousness and peace. They understood that Jews from all over the globe would be gathered together into the land and that the Lord would reign, Israel would be prominent and the Lord would actually reign from Israel over the whole earth. They were waiting for this to happen with the coming of Messiah. They knew Isaiah 9:6 and 7, "That a Child would be born to us, a Son will be given to us, the government will be upon His shoulders, and His name will be Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of peace."

They were familiar with the words of Isaiah. There will be no end to the increase of His government, or of peace on the throne of David. And over His Kingdom to establish it and uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forever more, the zeal of the Lord of host will perform this. They knew all of that very well. They were very familiar with Isaiah 11:1 and 2, that a Messiah would spring from the stem of Jesse, a branch from His roots would bear fruit and the Spirit of the Lord would rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom, understanding, counselor, strength, knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

They were familiar with the words of Jeremiah in chapter 23, "Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch and He will reign as King and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land. In his days, Judah will be saved. Israel will dwell securely. And this is His name by which He will be called, the Lord our righteousness."

They knew the words of Zechariah 14, that the day will come when the spoil that had been taken from them would be brought back to them. That living waters would flow out of Jerusalem. That there would be no more curse and Jerusalem would dwell securely. They were familiar with Daniel 2:44, that the God of heaven would set up a kingdom never to be destroyed and the kingdom not left for another people but for them, and it will last forever.

They expected their Messiah would come and establish a kingdom. They knew that before that kingdom there would be a time of Tribulation. There would be a time of judgment. There would be a judgment of Gentiles. There would be a judgment of rebels among the Jews. They knew there would be wars and catastrophes, there would be an escalation of iniquity. All of that is in the Old Testament. That the Lord would triumph over it all and establish the glory of His Kingdom, save Israel. Salvation would spread to the world, and the Lord Messiah would reign and rule.

As far as they were concerned, the time was now. The time was ready. The time was ripe. After all, they were believers in the Messiah, He was here. And they knew the Messiah would have a forerunner, one like Elijah, and that was John the Baptist, and he had come as well and pointed to the Messiah and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” And now the Messiah is here and He entered Jerusalem triumphantly and several hundred thousand people hailed Him as the Son of David and gave Him hosannas with expectation that He would be that Messiah. But it's all fading very fast.

In the first place, He stripped the leadership of Israel publicly and openly by cleansing the temple. He engaged in conversation with them and unmasked them as false. The people are turning away from Him. And He keeps talking about His death. He has stopped short of doing what they expected Him to do. When is the triumph going to begin? When is the glory going to come? When is judgment going to fall? When is the Kingdom going to be established?

And that's what they asked in verse 7, “When will these things be?” And He has to tell them not for a long time. Long being relative, they probably thought it was weeks, maybe months, maybe a few years. We now know it's as least two thousand years. Yes He's coming. Yes He's coming. Yes every generation should be prepared for His coming. He lays that out at the end of this message. But for the beginning of it, He says there are some things you should expect. This is very, very important, folks, because you want to be sure that the plan that Jesus established didn't go bad. He ends up on a cross. The world gets worse. Somebody might say, “Wow, whoever Jesus claimed to be, He was not. Whatever He claimed to do, He did not do. The world hasn't changed since He came, it's worst than it is now every way you look at it.”

Was that a surprise to Him? Not at all. And so, to secure us from being fearful or terrified. He explains exactly the way things will go until He comes. Three things to expect. Verse 8, deceivers, deception, false Christianity will flourish. “Many will come in My name,” many saying, “I am He, the time is at hand, do not go after them.” And the Bible is clear about the proliferation of these false Messiahs and false Apostles. I told you Josephus says that after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, there were so many people claiming to be the Messiah in the days after that, that Pilate was executing one a day. And it goes on today. False Christianity abounds and flourishes. It's larger than the true church.

Secondly, disasters, and we looked at that. Verses 9 through 11, wars and disturbances are further described in verse 10, nation against nation, kingdom against kingdom, global wars. Great earthquakes, plagues, famines, terrors like fire, hurricanes, winds, tornados, tidal waves, you name it. Great signs that come from heaven and we discussed those.

But the third thing, the first is deceivers, the second is disasters, and third is the distress of persecution. Before all these things, verse 12, “They will lay their hands on you and will persecute you.” This had to be the biggest jolt that they had yet heard. I mean, the idea was the Messiah comes, sets up the Kingdom and everything is good for us. What? The Messiah comes, doesn't set up the Kingdom and it's going to be bad for us. If you're a follower of Jesus Christ, it's going to be bad. And it's going to be bad and it's going to get worse and worse and worse until He finally comes. This is a total shock. This is outside the box of any of their thinking, totally unconventional, hard to believe.

And then He describes that persecution as being delivered to synagogues and prisons, that describes the Jewish persecution which was vicious against the early church, but ceased in 70 A.D. when Judaism was crushed by the Romans in the destruction of Jerusalem. But between the words of our Lord in 30 A.D. and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., 40 years of Jewish persecution of Christians. Following the Jewish persecution came the Gentile persecution, referred to in verse 12, bringing you between kings and governors for My namesake. And that has not stopped, that still goes on. Christians are still persecuted in the world today. And it escalates and escalates and escalates.

But then He gives us a hint about why. Verse 13, “It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony and don't worry about what you're going to say, I'm going to help you by the Holy Spirit give you a good confession.” The strategy, amazing strategy of the Lord is this. Between His first and second coming, fulfill the great commission. Between His first and second coming, go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. Between His first and second coming He gathers in the redeemed church.

And in order to expedite that, He brings persecution. What does persecution do? It does two things. One, it scatters the church. We see that in the book of Acts very early. The believers went everywhere because they were persecuted. They had to flee for their lives and with the fleeing came the spread of the gospel. Acts 8, Saul was in hearty agreement, putting him to death, that is Stephen, and on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem and they were all scattered throughout the reasons of Judea and Samaria.

Well isn't that what Jesus said to them in Acts 1? You are to preach the gospel in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the world? Well to help them get to Judea and Samaria, they might not have gone unless they are persecuted and it's been that way, the persecution of the church is the scattering of the church. There's a second component in persecution, the persecution of the church demonstrates

the triumph of saving faith. When you can survive the persecution and you can die a triumphant death, confessing Jesus Christ and not denying Him, there's a viability, a credibility and a power to your testimony.

Let me put it another way. There is no other religion in the world that has a Foxe's Book of Martyrs. Only Christianity. And there's no other religion on the face of the earth that's been persecuted anywhere close to the way Christians have been persecuted and the blood of the martyrs becomes the seed of the church. This is an evangelistic strategy. As the Lord gathers in His church by scattering His church through persecution and making their testimony powerful and viable and credible, as they face death triumphantly and make a good confession of Christ, which the true believer does make because the Lord enables him by the Holy Spirit and He doesn't have to worry about what he's going to say, the Lord will show him what to say in that hour.

So, Jesus said you're going to be persecuted. You're going to be persecuted by the Jews. And they were. We went through the history of that last week. Then you're going to be persecuted before kings and governors. This is Gentile persecution. Let me talk about that for a little bit, give you some history.

The history of Gentile persecution begins in the book of Acts also. And it begins with the Romans...it begins with the Romans. The Romans persecuted Christians and they persecuted Christians for several reasons. Originally they left the Christians alone, according to Acts 18 verses 12 to 15. They left the Christians alone. Why? Because originally the Romans viewed Christianity as a sect of Judaism and Judaism was regilio lacita(???), that is legal religion. The Romans didn't see a particular threat to Judaism so it hadn't been banned. And they saw Christianity as simply a sect of Judaism and they left them alone originally.

However, it didn't take long for this to change dramatically. The influx of Gentiles into the church became a problem for the Romans. As Paul began to move and have an impact and as churches were being established and the gospel was penetrating, the Roman world...Rome obviously dominating the world of the Mediterranean at that time, the Romans began to see Christianity as distinct from Judaism. For one reason, the Jews hated Christians. It didn't take Rome long to figure out that if the Jews hate Christians, then Christianity is not a part of Judaism. And so because of Jewish hostility toward Christians, toward the influx of Gentiles into the church, the Romans began to recognize Christianity as distinct from Judaism. Christianity they then outlawed, it became an illegal religion.

And there were several factors. And I think it's helpful to understand this, that led to this outlawing of Christianity and the subsequent persecution. So let me give you a little bit of that history.

First of all, there were political motivations...political. The Christians allegiance to Christ was singular. It was dominant. And they obviously had an allegiance to Christ that was far about their allegiance to Caesar. This aroused suspicion that they were disloyal to the Roman state to maintain control over their vast empire.

Now you remember, the Roman Empire is vast surrounding the Mediterranean and moving eastward. The one thing the Romans asked...they gave great freedom to their nations that they colonized and conquered, but one thing they asked is that their subject's ultimate loyalty to be the emperor. The emperor was the embodiment of the Roman state. And if you demonstrated loyalty to the Caesar, you were demonstrating loyalty to the Roman state.

Now keep in mind, in ancient times always there was a union of religion and state. In fact, the first nation in human history that did not have an allegiance between religion and the state is the United States of America. Prior to that, all civilizations had religion and the state joined in separably. So there was a union of religion and state.

Refusal then to worship the Roman gods or the emperor was treason. It was treason. Well, the Christians refused to worship the emperor. They refused to worship the Roman gods. They refused to make the required sacrifice in worship to the emperor. They were therefore seen as traitors. Nothing was more serious to the Romans than traitor attitudes.

They also proclaimed the Kingdom of God which caused the Romans to suspect them of trying to overthrow the government. They had another King and they had another Kingdom. Now the Christians knew they were under pressure, under duress, under persecution. So to avoid any unnecessary confrontation with Roman authorities, Christians began to hold their meetings in secret. Now we're still in the first century. They began to hold their meetings in secret and at night in clandestine places. Often associated, for example, with the catacombs.

Well the Romans eventually knew they were doing this and that heightened the Romans suspicions, that if they have to do this in secret, they must be hatching some kind of anti-government plot. Furthermore, Christians generally refused to serve in the Roman army. This also caused them to be viewed as disloyal. Plenty of political motivation for the persecution.

But in addition to that, there were closely tied religious motivations, secondly. The Romans had a very broad and somewhat tolerant attitude toward religion. They allowed their subjects to worship whatever gods they wanted to worship, as long as they also worshiped the Roman gods. Their approach to religion was all inclusive and what bothered them about Christianity was Christianity was exclusive. Christians preached an exclusive message that there is only one true God, one Savior, and one way of salvation. And they not only believed that, but they propagated that. They preached that. They were evangelistic, trying to win converts among the nations that were part of the Roman world.

This went against the prevailing dominant role of religious pluralism. Christians therefore were denounced strangely as atheists because they rejected the Roman pantheon of gods, because they would not worship the emperor as God, and because they didn't worship idols. And the Romans couldn't disassociate a god from an idol. If you had no idol, you had no god. They were atheists. And so, here are these subversive atheists, assaulting the unity and the peace of Rome with their exclusive God and exclusive message.

The secrecy of Christians also led to lurid false rumors of gross immorality. They assumed that they were in dark places and secretive places doing wicked evil things because that's what they did even in the open. That is the Romans. They misunderstood what was meant by eating and drinking the elements during the Lord's supper, which led to charges of cannibalism, that the Christians met to engage in lurid, immoral activity and eat each other.

They even attacked the Christian gesture of a holy kiss which was an embrace, as best we can tell, from cheek to cheek. That gave rise to false accusations of sexual misconduct. They painted a very, very evil picture of Christians, religiously. What kind of religion was that?

Socially they had another motivation, another category overlapping, the leaders of Roman society feared the influence of the Christians on the lower classes. You have to understand that there's no middle class in ancient world...as there is still in some countries in the world, no middle class, typically third world countries. You have no middle class, what you have is a mass of humanity that are poor. And you have a small group of elite people at the top who control all the wealth and have all the power and usually abuse the people who are poor. This is what foments revolution. This is why there was a Russian Revolution. This is why there was a French Revolution. This is why there is revolution typically anywhere in the world. The oppressed have the numbers. And finally they arise, get organized and overthrow the elite.

Well the leaders of Roman society feared the influence of Christians on the lower classes because the Christians were drawing people from the lower classes. Remember 1 Corinthians 1? “Not many noble, mighty, lowly, the base, the lowly, the no-names, the nobodies.” which is to say there was a growing number of Christians who were from the slave population, ten to twelve million slaves in the Roman Empire. The wealthy aristocrats easily threatened...easily threatened by the fear of slave revolt, feared that Christians were fomenting this revolt, particularly because Christians taught that there's neither bond nor free in Christ. And so they failed to recognize the status of the elite.

Haunting at the ever-present specter of the potential of the slave revolt, the wealthy aristocrats began to turn up the heat on Christians. And it is true, Christians held themselves aloof from much of public life. Everything was connected to idols. If you went to a theatrical event, if you went to a sporting event, if you went to any kind of civil event, there would be idolatry involved in it. And there would be

all the kind of behavior that went along with their evil idolatry. And so Christians just could not really engage in the activities of the culture. They were completely counter-culture. They did nothing to accommodate the culture whatsoever. They couldn't, their conscience restrained them from doing that.

To put it in the modern vernacular, they had no interest in contextualizing. They couldn't participate because everything involved was a sacrifice to a pagan deity. And so they threatened on every level...politically, religiously and socially.

One other factor probably should come into play, economic. There were economic reasons why the Romans went after the Christians. It's overlooked but the persecution of the early church had a lot to do with the dent that the gospel was making in the false god trade. You remember Acts 16? Paul cast a demon out of a girl, a slave girl at Philippi who was making a fortune for her masters by telling people's fortune. She was a medium for demons that were speaking through her and doing their demonic magic, as it were. And when he cast the demon out of her, they lost their source of income. Do you remember the same thing happened...that's in Acts 16, in Acts 19 there was a riot at Ephesus and they tried to kill Paul because he made such a dent in the the idol trade there. Remember his preaching of the gospel had caused people to burn all their idols and shut down the sale of idols? They went after him.

Early in the second century, Pliny, the Roman governor of Athenia, lamented in a letter to Emperor Trajan that the spread of Christianity, he says, has caused the pagan temples to be deserted and the sales of sacrificial animals to plummet. You remember now, you're living in a superstitious time. People attribute plague, famine, and natural disaster and all the other things that happen in life, to the gods being unhappy. And the idea was, the gods are unhappy because the Christians are forsaking them. And all of this is coming on us because all these Christians are forsaking the gods and the gods are mad. It prompted the Christian apologist Tertullian to remark, “If the Tiber reaches the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the sky doesn't move or the earth does, if there's a famine, if there's a plague, the cry is at once, ‘Christians to the lion.'” The gods were mad because of the Christians. For reasons, or perhaps related reasons, Christianity became a hated and despised religious sect in the Roman Empire. His letter to Emperor Trajan, Pliny scorned Christianity. He said, “It's a depraved and extravagant superstition.” And went on to complain, quote; “The contagion of this superstition has spread not only in the cities but in the villages and the rural districts as well,” end quote. It's going everywhere.

Sure the gospel was penetrating, people were being converted. The church was growing. And it had a detrimental effect on Roman life. The Roman historian Tacitus, a contemporary by the way of Pliny, describes Christians as a class hated for their abominations. Satonius(??), another contemporary of Pliny, dismissed them as a set of men adhering to a novel and mischievous superstition.

And so persecution came and it began to foment and it began to develop. The first official breakout of persecution is 64 A.D., the month of July, six years before the destruction of Jerusalem, under the Emperor Nero. You remember, July of A.D. 64 a fire ravaged Rome, destroying or damaging much of the city. Popular rumors pinned the cause or the source of Nero himself. You remember Nero fiddling while Rome burned. Probably not accurate but Nero needed a scapegoat. He needed somebody that people already thought were responsible for bad things, and that was the Christians. And so he blamed the Christians already destroyed by the populous began to savagely persecute them in an organized way. Christians were arrested, cruelly tortured, thrown to wild animals, crucified and doused with oil and put on sticks and lit as torches for Nero's garden parties at night.

This first official organized persecution basically was in the vicinity of Rome. But attacks on Christians began to spread and move wider. And they were unchecked by the authorities. According to tradition, both Peter and Paul were martyred under this persecution in the time of Nero.

Three decades later, you move into the nineties, the first century, during the reign of Emperor Domitian, another government sponsored persecution of Christians breaks out. We don't know a lot of the details but it extended all over the area around Israel and it went all the way to Asia Minor which is modern-day Turkey. It was this persecution under Domitian that caught John the Apostle and had him exiled to the Isle of Patmos. And among those martyred at that time was a man named Antipas, a faithful pastor.

One notable example of Christian martyrdom in that time is Polycarp, the aged bishop at the church at Smyrna, around 160 A.D. He was arrested for being Christian, tied to a stake and burned. And when asked to deny Christ, Polycarp said this, “Eighty and six years...eighty and six years have I served Him and He never did me any injury. How can I then blaspheme My King and My Savior?” And he died triumphantly.

It wasn't long until you had an empire-wide persecution, extending through the whole Roman Empire in the year 250 under Emperor Disyius(??). Rome at that time faced serious internal issues, economic crisis, natural disasters, external issues, the incursion of barbarians. Disyius(??) was convinced that all these difficulties were coming again because of the Christians who were forsaking Rome's ancient gods. He issued an edict requiring everyone to offer a sacrifice to the gods and to the emperor and obtain a certificate attesting that they had done that. And if they didn't do that, they were to be imprisoned, tortured and then slaughtered.

It didn't last long, however, by July of the next year, 251, Disyius(??) died in a battle. Persecution didn't end. Jumped from 251 A.D. to A.D. 303. Fifty-two years later the most violent empire-wide persecution came under an emperor named Diocletian. It was an all-out attempt to exterminate the Christian faith. He issued a series of edicts ordering churches to be destroyed. All copies of the Bible

to be burned. All Christians offer sacrifice to the Roman gods or be killed. It wasn't until the Edict of Milan, Constantine was part of that in 313 that that persecution ended, three years of it. And then by 324, Constantine had established Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire.

Did that end persecution? No. The Holy Roman Empire, the false form of Christianity began to persecute the true church. In the most massive persecution yet came during the Middle Ages. When I say massive, I mean massive. According to historian, John Dowling, a reputable historian, the Roman Catholic Church put to death 50 million heretics between A.D. 606 and mid-1800's, many of them true Christians...50 million. Murderous was that period of time.

The Reformers came along, denounced the Catholic system of indulgences and works righteousness. In the time of the Reformation, the 1500's, the response from Rome was vitriolic and violent. And, of course, added to the 50 million that were slaughtered during that time. Godly leader like John Huss, Hugh Latimer, William Tyndale, Patrick Hamilton, George Wishert(?), many others, martyred for their faith. It was Huss secured to a stake where he would be burned, said with a smile, “My Lord Jesus was bound with a harder chain than this for my sake, why then should I be ashamed of this rusty one.” When asked to renounce, Huss declined saying, “What I taught with my lips, I now seal with my blood,” and gave testimony to the glory and honor of Christ and the truth of the gospel in his death. And that's what Jesus said would happen. It will turn out for your testimony because the Spirit will show you what to say.

The triumph and testimony of John Huss has been the cause of the conversion of who knows how many...countless thousands...through history. He died, by the way, singing a hymn as the flames engulfed his body.

No other religion has this history. In many places in the world today, believers continue to be persecuted. Muslim and Hindu-controlled countries, especially Africa and the Middle East, especially murderous toward Christians. Though other nations such as Communistic states are also antagonistic and during the development of Communism, Christians were massacred wholesale. Nineteen-ninety-seven, an article in the New York Times reports, quote: “More Christians have died this century simply for being Christians than in the first nineteen centuries after the birth of Christ.” Twentieth century, more Christians died than in the nineteen centuries before...New York Time, February 11, 1997.

In addition, an incalculable number of faithful believers have been rejected by their families, hated by their parents, hated by their siblings, by their friends, arrested, beaten, persecuted short of death...all on account of loyalty to Christ. There's a relatively new book called The New Persecuted, published in 2002. A Roman Catholic journalist, Antonio Suchii(?). He estimates that in the two thousand years of church history, seventy million Christians have been martyred. The number is likely much greater since he minimizes the number of those executed under the Roman Catholic Church. God knows, I

don't know how many but the numbers are staggering.

He also says that of these 70 million Christians, two thirds have been killed in the last hundred years. He claims that an average of 160 thousand Christians have been killed every year since 1990...160 thousand a year since 1990.

So was our Lord right when He said you can expect this in the time between My first and My second coming? He was right about the wars. He was absolutely right about the earthquakes and the plagues and the famines, that they would increase and escalate and become worse and worse and worse. And we see it played out just the way He said it. Don't think for one split second that the purpose of Jesus failed at the cross. Don't think that what He intended to do didn't come to pass. He laid out exactly what would happen and that's the way it is in the history of the world. And it's going to get worse, not better. If you think persecution of believers is going to go away, you're wrong. The church is going to continue to be persecuted because it's going to continue to be scattered for purposes of evangelism. And it's going to continue to have to give its testimony of triumph in the face of persecution so to demonstrate its truthfulness and validity and persecution will continue and get worse.

Let me jump all the way to the book of Revelation chapter 6, as we close, and take you into the future time called the Time of Tribulation when persecution will reach its greatest point. Come in to chapter 6 of Revelation, you're in the time of Tribulation. The church has been Raptured. The gospel has been preached to the world after the Rapture. The gospel has been preached with power by two witnesses, preached with the supernatural means by an angel flying in the heaven preaching the everlasting gospel, been preached by 144 thousand Jews, twelve thousand from every tribe. The results are the greatest revival in human history. People are being converted. And when they're being converted in the time of Tribulation because Antichrist rules the world, they're also being persecuted. Persecuted like never before. Many of them are martyred.

We meet them in chapter 6 verse 9. “He broke the fifth seal.” This is the angel breaking the judgment in the time of Tribulation. “I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the Word of God and because of the testimony which they had maintained.”

Now you've got the people who were slain and killed. When? During the time of the Tribulation. They are given a white robe, and to rest a little while longer until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been should be completed also. God knows it's going to happen. He even knows the exact number of those who come to faith in Christ after the Rapture of the church who will be then martyred.

Chapter 7 and verse 9, “After these things I looked and behold a great multitude which no one could count from every nation, all tribes and peoples and tongues standing before the throne and before the

Lamb clothed in white robes and palm branches were in their hands, crying with a loud voice saying, ‘Salvation to our God that sits upon the throne and the Lamb.'" Here is a group of people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation gathered around the throne. They have been saved. They're crying out about salvation. They're celebrating the work of the Lamb. Who are these people? Verse 14, “Who are they?” Verse 13 he asks the question, “Where did they come from?” I said, “My Lord, you know.” He said to me, “These are the ones who come out of the Great Tribulation. They've washed their robes, made them white in the blood of the Lamb and they are now before the throne of God serving Him day and night.”

These are the martyrs of the time of the Tribulation, those who were slaughtered for their faith. Two witnesses in chapter 11, and verse 7, two witnesses, God sends two amazing witnesses. Chapter 11 verse 7, “After they had finished their testimonies, their testimony concerning the gospel, the beast that comes out of the abyss, the Antichrist, will make war with them and overcome them and kill them.” Chapter 12 verse 17, “The dragon,” meaning Satan, “is enraged with the woman,” the woman represents Israel, “and went off to make war with the rest of her offspring who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.” One of the greatest slaughters in the time of the Tribulation is going to be the Jews that Antichrist will kill who will come to faith in Christ.

Chapter 13 verse 7, speaking again of the Antichrist, the great blasphemer that dominates the world at that time. “It was given to him to make war with the saints and overcome them and authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation was given to him. And all who dwell on the earth will worship him, every one whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the Book of Life of the Lamb who has been slain.” He's going to rule the whole word, that is everybody who is not in the Lamb's Book of Life and he's going to make war with the saints. They're going to be killed, martyred, gathered under the altar from every tongue and tribe and people and nation crying, “How long, O Lord, how long, how long until You come and bring judgment on those who kill Your people?”

False religion has killed millions and millions and millions of people through the centuries. The final system will even be more deadly in the future. We don't expect persecution to go away. It will keep going like this until the Lord comes to judge.

Why? Because God spreads His gospel through persecution. Because God gives testimony to the strength of saving faith and the glory of the gospel through martyrdom and through suffering.

Now let's go back to Luke 21 and close. Here is the end of this on persecution, however. Verse 17 says, “You'll be hated by all on account of My name,” that is exactly the way it's been through the history of the world. “Yet not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.” Powerful statements and I'm going to tell you what they mean next Sunday. Let's bow in prayer...and they're absolutely important words.

As we bow our heads in prayer for just a moment, I don't know how to make the message any more urgent than the Scripture makes it. I'm not intending to do that. Except to drive it home to your own heart and say this...Look, history is not random, it's not cyclical. It has a beginning and an end. And it is prewritten by God and Jesus knew exactly the way history would go. He didn't expect to come and build some wonderful religion that everybody would embrace, He knew better than that. He knew the truth would be so exclusive that it would be hated. So narrow, so defined that it would be despised, even inside families. And that's exactly the way it's been.

This has led to the spread of the gospel, it has led to the opportunity to proclaim the gospel in the direst of situations. And this kind of persecution short of death even leads to the strengthening of believers who are made perfect by their trial and who are given assurance because tested faith is assured faith. When your faith stands the test, you know it's the real thing.

So the Lord has His purposes in suffering, purposes of dependence, purposes of evangelism. The question comes down to you. This is the truth, look at history. Jesus knew exactly what would happen, and it did. It is and it will be this way. This is God who is speaking here. And when He says He's the only Savior, that's the truth...that's the truth. You must turn to Him and Him alone. Do that today.

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