



The tribe of Issachar understood the times and knew what Israel should do

Issachar Ministries UK seeks to be a people who understand the times, listen to the Lord and know what should be done

Resourcing for Prayer Network **Spiritual Guidelines**

Teaching on the Kingdom **The Sermon on the Mount (ix)**

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of their righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

(Matthew 5.10-12)

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This is the last of the eight Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew 5 and is probably the most significant of the blessings as it is expanded over three verses. Although there is no comparable blessing in the Sermon on the Plain recorded by Luke 6, there are similarities we can learn from in one of the blessings: 'Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man' (v 22) and even in one of the woes 'Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets' (v 26).

When Jesus made these pronouncements he was in effect helping his listeners to understand more about the Kingdom of God (or of Heaven) and letting them know the characteristics of those who would truly experience the kind of happiness which was of lasting value. This was often in direct contrast to worldly values and would have given them the best guidelines for living, and in the case of the woes, what to avoid.

All the Beatitudes are paradoxes contrasting Kingdom values with secular values but this is probably the greatest paradox of all - as Christians we must reckon upon hardships and troubles more than unbelievers.

Persecution of All Kinds

Down the ages Christians have been persecuted, hunted, pursued, imprisoned, banished, scourged, racked, tortured and burned at the stake; they have been fined, stripped of all their belongings, prohibited from positions in government; and they have often been ridiculed, given nicknames or suffered all manner of evil including false accusations and mockery.

Prophets in the Old Testament were especially vulnerable: '*Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him'* (Acts 7:52). '*But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the Lord was aroused against his people and there was no remedy'* (2 Chron. 36:16).

James recommended the endurance of the prophets: '*Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord'* (5:10). Jesus in the Beatitudes stressed the need for righteousness '*For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven'* (Matt 5.20).

There are conditions - so if we are persecuted because of our behaviour or have wrong motives we cannot expect blessings. It is not the suffering that matters but what has caused it. We need to ensure that *'zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall on me'* (Ps. 69:9). *'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered'* (Rom 8:36 Ps 44:22)

There are many biblical examples of persecution such as what happened when Paul had been in Thessalonica *'But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: 'These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here'* (Acts 17:6). Similar things happened in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:50). Jeremiah observed *'Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?'* (Jer. 20:18); and the Psalmist says *'Ruthless witnesses come forward; they question me on things I know nothing about'* (Ps. 35:11).

Persecution IS 'Blessing'???

None of us wants 'persecution' but it is happening today in so many places and communities around the world and God can use it for his purposes. It is often in areas of persecution that Christianity is expanding the most rapidly.

Tertullian way back in the 3rd century noted that **'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church'**. If those being persecuted are faithful it is a powerful witness to non-believers who feel they must have something of value. If people are willing to die for their faith. The biblical record *'and the Lord added to the church'* changed at the time of persecution to *'and the church multiplied'*. This is recorded following the stoning of Stephen when the authorities expected that this new faith would be wiped out *'On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria'* (Acts 8:1). *'Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews'* (Acts 11:19). Then Paul, who was also persecuted spread it to the Gentiles,

It is also true that many Christians come to faith at some point of challenge in their life. In the same way when we suffer for our faith we are actually strengthened by having to rely entirely upon God. *'That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong'* (2 Corinthians 12:10). Christianity should always be a challenge - to our own way of living as Christians which will then give us Christ's strength to challenge the values of the world - and to endure the persecution that will almost inevitably follow.

What should we do? How should we respond?

There are occasions when we can see that our witness can be a blessing and an encouragement to others: *'Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith'* (1 Thess 3:7). *'Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring'* (2 Thess 1:4).

The next step is to pray for those who persecute you, to have enough faith to pour blessings on them. *'Bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you'* (Luke 6:28). *'Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse'* (Rom 12:14).

Rewards

The rewards are self-evident: *'Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him'* (James 1:12). *'Truly I tell you,' Jesus replied, 'no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields - along with persecutions - and in the age to come eternal life'* (Mark 10:29-30).

'But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells' (2 Pet 3.13)

The letter to the Church in Smyrna reads *'Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown'* (Rev 2:10). And another promise from Revelation of those who are the overcomers: *'Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years'* (20:6).

Finally

When we ask ourselves *'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?'* (Rom 8:35) we need to be able to respond as Paul did *'For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord'* (38-39).

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