

“Proclaiming the Gospel from the Stage of Persecution”

Matthew 10:16-23

11-11-18

A couple weeks ago, my wife and I had the opportunity to see a Christian film called *Indivisible*. It’s the story about a Military Chaplain and his wife and the challenges they face when he returns from active duty in the Middle East. In one particular scene, as the commander prepares the troops for that day’s mission, he not only gives them specific instructions as to what they are to do, he also warns them of the danger that they will face. He emphasizes their need for watchful and discerning eyes, watching the ground for potential explosives, and watching every person as a potential enemy. On enemy territory, they need to be wise and discerning. They need to be shrewd, they need to be sharp. And they need to risk their lives to advance the mission.

In a similar way, Jesus is preparing his disciples for their first mission and beyond. Not to fight a physical battle, but to advance the mission of the gospel amidst a hostile world. He warns them to beware of the dangers that will surround them and He prepares them to not lose sight of their mission when they are besieged with intimidation and suffering from those who reject Christ.

Let me summarize the message in this way: ***When we are persecuted because of the world’s hostility toward Christ, we must beware of hostile men, yet not allow their intimidation to prevent us from faithfully advancing the gospel.***

It’s important to remember that today’s passage is just a slice out of the entire teaching of Jesus in chapter 10. And so we must keep in mind that there is a sense of the whole chapter that should bleed through in today’s passage. And when that happens, we walk away with the clear impression that ***we must exercise greater concern for the advancement of the gospel than for the preservation of our own lives.***

Here’s how Jesus said it:

- Vs. 26-27: “Do not fear them....What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light.”
- Vs. 28: “*Do not fear* those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather *fear Him* who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”

Let me put it this way: ***We must fear God in such a way that we become fearless before our persecutors.*** When persecution comes we must focus our attention not exclusively on our safety and the preservation of our lives, but on faithfully testifying to the gospel. As we will see again today, its not wrong to avoid persecution and suffering when we can. But its never right to abandon our mission of representing Christ and His gospel.

Now let’s take a closer look at our text beginning with **[vs. 16]**. Jesus uses an analogy here to describe the environment into which He is sending His disciples and then He will give us two sets of warnings and promises which results in similar conclusions.

The analogy is that of sheep sent into a wilderness inhabited by wolves. The first thing to note is that sheep are defenseless against wolves apart from the protection of the Shepherd. And so Jesus disciples not only need to be aware that there is danger all about them. They also need to comprehend their own vulnerability. Last week we saw that Jesus gave the apostles authority over unclean spirits and to heal every kind of sickness and disease (10:1). But this does not mean they are invincible. They will be vulnerable to the very wolves who would soon crucify Jesus Himself.

Let this be a reminder that all of us must live within the tension of our own inadequacy and God’s sufficiency. On the one hand Jesus said, “***apart from Me you can do nothing***” but on the other He said, “***with God all things are possible.***”¹ How we need to live in an abiding relationship of prayer if we will be fruitful at all. Our only hope of protection and progress in our mission is if we take every step in the shadow of the Almighty (Ps 91:1).

¹ John 15:5; Matt 19:26

Because Jesus sends His disciples out as sheep among wolves, He says, therefore “be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.” To be shrewd means to be wise, discerning, not naïve. Be street-smart, be alert. Know who you are dealing with. Beware of looming danger. To be innocent is to remember who we represent. That at all times, even in the most precarious and dangerous situations, we are to represent Christ. Never are we to compromise righteousness, purity, or faithfulness to Jesus. Our integrity and obedience to God should leave no other reason for us to be opposed, other than our allegiance to Christ as Lord.

Now in vs. 17 Jesus issues the first warning which affirms our need to be shrewd or wise: “*Beware of men, for they will hand you over to the courts and scourge you in their synagogues*”—so this will be a religious persecution, by the Jewish establishment. Furthermore, Jesus goes on in vs. 18 to describe a civil persecution as well: “you will even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles.” In both cases, whether religious persecution by the Jewish establishment or persecution by the secular state, Paul uses the formal language of being “handed over” or being “brought before” rulers indicating formal charges and punishment.

This prophetic warning that they will be arrested, tried, charged, and punished, is not without divine purpose. It will be for Christ’s sake, “as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles” (18).

Life Principle: ***Even persecution is a servant in the hand of God to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ.*** The Good Shepherd will send His sheep into places where we will be vulnerable and our lives will be at risk in order to give us a platform from which to share the gospel. It’s as if Jesus is saying, when” you are handed over and brought to trial, don’t forget that that is your opportunity testify of the gospel.” How else will rulers hear the gospel? How else will the gospel spread to the Gentiles? “I will take you into locked prisons and into courtrooms to announce life and freedom in Jesus’ name!” I get the sense here that though we become victims of persecution, we should live like victims, but as men and women still on mission—like Paul and Silas in prison!

With this warning, comes the promise in vs. 19: “But when they hand you over, do not worry about how or what you are to say; for it will be given you in that hour what you are to say. For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.” This is not a promise to lazy preachers. This is the promise that God will empower our witness under the severe pressure of persecution. These are untrained men, not eloquent lawyers. Yet the very purpose for which God has given them an audience with rulers and kings before a watching world, is the very purpose for which He will empower them to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Life Principle: ***In times of persecution, God gives grace to meet the trial.*** The circumstances will never be greater than the grace God provides for us honor Him in it. Grace like He gave to Joseph Tson and his wife in Romania to serve with hospitality the very men who confiscated their possession from their home. Grace to persevere in witnessing to those who beat him and interrogated him weeks on end.

Notice that this is not a promise to be delivered from the persecution. It is a promise to be kept faithful through the persecution. Did you notice that when Jesus said, “do not worry,” He did not say, “I will preserve your life.” Rather He said, “I will empower your witness.” We get the distinct sense that we are our greatest concern is not the preservation of our lives but the progress of the gospel. Chapter 10 is about risking our lives on earth for the sake of those who need eternal life. A true biblical perspective according to Jesus is that when it comes to the defining hour of testing, our faithful witness for Christ is of greater importance than losing our lives or being imprisoned.

Is Jesus that precious to you? Is the gospel, that Christ died for our sins to deliver us from the wrath of God and reconcile us to Him as our Father for all eternity—is that gospel more precious than earthly life itself?

This first warning of persecution along with the promise of empowerment for our witness brings us to this conclusion: ***Persecution is an opportunity or gospel witness.*** In fact, we need to view all of our circumstances as potential opportunities for gospel witness. You may not be enduring

persecution right now, but can you see the hand of God behind your trials and tribulations? Do not waste your suffering. Look for every opportunity to testify to the sustaining grace of God in the midst of suffering.

So far this has been pretty weighty and sobering truth, hasn't it. As we come to the second warning and promise it will get even weightier. The intensity of betrayal now goes to the deepest level of family. And the scope of hostility and rejection to the broadest degree.

Vs. 21: *“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. You will be hated by all because of My name...”*

The gospel and its actual power to reconcile us to God, turning His wrath to favor, restoring eternal life those who believe, is so precious that our loyalty to Christ outweighs any other rival relationship, even that of family at the deepest level. So great will be the world's hostility toward Christ, that even the deepest family ties will become bonds of hatred and death toward Christ-followers. Jesus speaks of a day when His disciples will be treated in the same way He Himself would be condemned to death. Even today, many believers around the world, live in this reality. They are sheep among the wolves, and for some even their own family members prove to be wolves.

This is why Jesus says later in vs. 36, “A man's enemies will be the members of His household. He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and He who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.” When we talk about the supremacy of Christ in a believer's life, it is without exception.

Not only will persecution divide families, it will be pervasive: “You will be hated by all because of My name...” Jesus probably does not mean that we will be hated by every person “without exception...but all men without distinction.”² In other words, there will be no place in this world, no aspect of society where believers will be safe from persecution.

Life Principle: ***Do not expect to be loved or even tolerated by the world. Rather, expect that the world will hate us even as we bring the love of Christ to them.*** How deeply rooted our identity must be in Christ!

Yet with this warning of both family-induced and world-wide persecution, comes a promise in vs. 22: ***“but it is the one who endures to the end who will be saved.”*** Jesus gives us the deep and powerful encouragement that at the end of perseverance is the reward of salvation.

Who would chose this path of discipleship at such a cost? To be rejected even by one's own family and have no place in the world safe from persecution. Yet, Jesus assures us that we do not suffer in vain. Salvation awaits those who cling to Christ.

Jesus is not saying that perseverance is the means to salvation. Rather, He is saying that salvation (faith) is the means to perseverance. How do we remain faithful through such rejection and opposition? We cling to the hope of salvation that awaits every believer in the end.

Throughout these verses, Jesus has been preparing His disciples not only for their immediate mission, but also what they (and we) will need to be prepared for in the future. But now in vs. 23, He turns back to the more immediate ministry of the first disciples. **[vs. 23]**

This verse has been regarded as mysterious because Jesus is saying that by the time the first disciples have finished preaching in the cities of Israel the Lord would come. The question is, what does He mean by the phrase, “until the Son of Man comes?” Many of us assume He is referring to the second coming, which Jesus speaks clearly of later in chapter 24. But that is not what Jesus is referring to here. We are confident of that based on at least two reasons. First, the disciples would not have understood it that way because Jesus has not yet taught them about the second coming. Furthermore, when Jesus did speak of the second coming He used a specific term, Parousia (a NT technical term for Jesus' second coming). But here Jesus simply says, until He comes (erchomai).

² D.A. Carson, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8, pg. 249-250.

The Son of Man language in the gospels relies heavily upon Daniel 7 in which one like the Son of Man is presented before God and given an everlasting kingship over all people. The picture there is not one of the Son of Man coming to earth, but being endowed with heavenly authority over all people. So the exaltation of Christ which took place in conjunction with His resurrection and ascension seems to be in view, giving Jesus authority to issue judgement. In the context of Matthew 24, the disciples were warned that judgment would come in various stages, beginning with the destruction of the temple and culminating with the final judgment at the second coming. The destruction of the temple which would take place in 70 AD, in the timeframe of the disciples' earthly ministry.

For our purposes this morning, what I simply want you to see the sense of urgency in vs. 23, that in the face of persecution, the disciples were not to withdraw from their mission. If they were rejected in one city, they were to move on to the next. There is a sense of urgency in getting the message of the gospel out. The Risen Christ would use His authority to bring judgment against Israel in the destruction of the temple by the Romans within 40 years. And so Jesus instructs His disciples to get the gospel to as many people as possible.

Persecution in one city, would serve to spread the gospel to the next. Again we see this life principle: ***Persecution expedites the progress of the gospel.*** We see this principle worked out in the book of Acts. Persecution is like throwing water on a grease fire—it just causes it to spread. If you are rejected in one place, go to the next. Keep sharing the gospel with urgency because the day of reckoning draws ever near.

So what have we seen in Matthew 10?

We are to expect persecution and yet recognize that even persecution does not circumvent God's purposes. Rather, we should always be alert, watching for divine opportunities to testify for Christ, knowing that even persecution can become a servant in the hand of God to advance the gospel.

We know that "in the last days difficult times will come" (2 Tim 3:1). Do we live in fear of those days even now? Or do we see them as divine opportunities to put the gospel of Jesus Christ on display? If we live in fear, it's because self-preservation has the upper hand. If we live as though being a faithful witness for Christ is superior, it's no guarantee that we won't have to battle fear, but the fear of God will enable us to stand.

As a church, we have been praying not only for our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world, but also that God would raise up evangelists and missionaries to go to unreached people groups around the world. Do you understand what we are doing? We are praying for Matthew 10 disciples. We are praying that the Lord of the Harvest would send out many, maybe even some of our own, as sheep among the wolves.

What we must take away from Matt 10 is the urgency of sharing the gospel. Jesus' heart is captivated with a passion for the gospel to reach the ends of the earth. This means that our primary preoccupation in life should also be to make the gospel known. Matthew's gospel will end in chapter 28 with Jesus sending us out by His own authority. He has warned us that there will be suffering along the way, but He has also promised that He will be with— "for I am with you always, even to the end of the age!"

If we are not to abandon the mission when persecution is at its peak, how much more ought we to pray for opportunities to effectively share the hope of Christ in these days of relative peace.

Prayer:

- to have Jesus' passion for the gospel to reach all people
- specific people
- to transform my trials into a platform to speak of the sustaining grace of God.