

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR  
RIGHTEOUSNESS SAKE  
AGAINST THE GRAIN - Part 9  
Ben Rudolph**

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Good morning Life Fellowship. It is good to see you here this morning. Today we are concluding our series on The Beatitudes called ‘Against the Grain.’ And we are ending with this final Beatitude that Jesus talked about which is: “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.*” And this is an interesting passage to preach.

About seven or eight years ago, I was pastoring at another much smaller church and there was just me and one other pastor that were on staff. And one of the things that we wanted to always do was to make sure that we were just out there sharing the gospel. We didn’t want to get so locked into doing church work that we weren’t engaging with people. So the other pastor was named Bobby Wilkinson and we would go downtown Charlotte on most Mondays to Trade and Tryon. Bobby was a gifted musician so he would get a permit from the City, he would plug his speakers in, and he would play worship music. A lot of times when we think of street preachers we think of people who seem crazy, giving a little bit of truth but saying it very harshly and turning people off. But this was not Bobby. He would just sing worship and praise songs. And in between songs he might just talk about the goodness of God and how great Jesus is. And every once in a while I would get on the mic as well.

I went down with him because many times people would stop and listen to Bobby while he sang worship songs, and then I could have a spiritual conversation with them. I would ask them why they stopped to listen, what they believed, and if they were Christians I would ask them if this was encouraging to them. Some would be agnostics and atheists. I had some very interesting conversations during that season that we would do this on Mondays.

I will never forget being there in the heart of Charlotte on Trade and Tryon seeing the hustle and bustle of the City. And one time I was standing there at the corner just listening to Bobby and waiting for someone to stop, when these two college aged girls walked by. This was when Bobby was kind of talking about Jesus and the gospel, the cross and the resurrection. Again he was presenting the gospel in a very gentle and kind way. He was never harsh or browbeating. But these two college aged girls walked by and they looked at Bobby with amazement, and then I hear one of them say to the other: “*Are they allowed to do that in public?*” Now that was seven years ago. And as I overheard that question I was just in shock. ‘*What do you mean are we allowed to do that in public?*’ I mean this is America, right? But that was a moment I look back on, and it was a moment when I recognized things were changing in our country. I don’t know what the younger generation is being taught, but the reality is they were questioning if someone should legitimately be able to get in public open spaces and very gently and very kindly declare the gospel of Jesus Christ. They were questioning if they were even allowed to do that.

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR  
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---

To be honest if I were to preach on this passage three, four, five or ten years ago, I think it would be much different than today. Not that the meaning of this text has changed, but the cultural and social reality of our nation has changed. Now my desire this morning is not to be a fear monger or an alarmist, but what we have to do is honestly look at what God's Word and especially what Jesus has to say about persecution. And then to challenge our hearts to respond biblically to the time we find ourselves in.

I will be honest with you, when I came across the Beatitudes and read them in years past, I could relate to every single passage, every one of these Beatitudes I could see myself and it would challenge me. But when I would get to this Beatitude, "***Blessed are those who are persecuted,***" I thought that was for other Christians. We are in America and we are free. Yeah, someone might make fun of me and someone might not like me, but it was not persecution.

And I honestly believe that what seemed impossible a generation ago, and I say this not to scare us and think we are under persecution by any means, and I am not even promising that persecution will come, but there is a question that I am beginning to ask myself and that is this: *'Is it possible? Is it possible that persecution could happen within my lifetime in the United States of America?'* And the way that I would honestly answer that today is *'Yes, it is possible.'* What I believed was impossible a generation ago is at least possible today.

Whenever you are communicating God's Word, it really requires a harmony of explanation of the text, illustration of stories, pictures of what you are trying to say, and then application of how to live this out. To be honest with you I feel like I could talk for two hours this morning. I really could, but I know we are all hungry, or at some point we are going to be. So because of our time constraints I want to spend the bulk of our time on the application of this text, because I believe that is where we find ourselves.

As we study these Beatitudes, "***Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek,***" we know that this word 'blessed' means the idea of being satisfied and full. In studying these Beatitudes we have come to understand that this idea of mourning, or being poor in spirit, or hungering and thirsting after righteousness, or being peacemakers, or being merciful, that there is a reward associated with them. So as we get to this passage today I have some thoughts I want to share with you and then we are going to get into some questions that we need to ask ourselves this morning.

Let's look at verse 10 of Matthew Chapter 5 where it says, "***Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***" Now notice you have the first Beatitude which is, "***Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,***" and then it ends with "***Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***" The kingdom of heaven

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR  
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AGAINST THE GRAIN - Part 9  
Ben Rudolph**

---

bookends these two statements, and this is a full cycle of what happens when you live according to God's values, His kingdom. When you are His citizen the trajectory of your life and the kingdom of God will be bookending between these two statements, and everything in between.

Notice that in most of the previous eight statements that Jesus gave He didn't give an explanation, but He gives an explanation for this last one. Look at verse 11 where it says: "***Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.***" So I have a few ideas I just want to point out to you about this text.

Number one is this – when you and I think about following God and doing what He wants us to do, there is an idea of what our life will look like if we do what God wants us to do. And I believe that the majority of us, whether we have ever spoken this or not, we honestly believe if we do everything according to God's Word, if we do the right things, if we do the biblical things, if our lives are spirit filled and we are controlled by the Holy Spirit, and we do everything that Jesus wants us to do, there will be this little equal sign that shows our life will look good. We believe we will receive our best life now and that is what some pastors are saying today erroneously.

What we have here is this out of left field statement after Jesus has said blessed are you when you do this and blessed are you who are mourning, and blessed are you who are merciful and blessed are the peacemakers. His final culmination if we do all of these things and then there is the last domino to fall. The last domino to fall is persecution. And that is not American. That is not how we want to think about life. That is not how we want to think will be the end if we do all the things right that God wants us to do and expects us to do. We don't want to think that the end leads to persecution. That doesn't make sense to us.

But here is what we do. We try to make deals with God by thinking if we do the right things, God will owe us something good. And Jesus flips that idea upside down. I appreciate Jason sharing what persecution is this morning. The Greek word for persecution means 'to drive away.' So this whole idea of persecution means to treat someone harshly or unjustly, to push them out of our lives. If it is done by a group of people it means to push them outside of society, or to push them outside of the public square. We will do something to harm or injure unjustly a group of people, whether based on what they look like, or what they believe, or how they think. Persecution is this idea to drive people out because we don't want them here anymore. That is the essence of persecution.

A question I thought to myself was this – is there a difference between discrimination and persecution? We hear a lot about discrimination, and discrimination

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR  
RIGHTEOUSNESS SAKE  
AGAINST THE GRAIN - Part 9  
Ben Rudolph**

---

is essentially treating someone unjustly because of prejudice. But persecution goes a step beyond that. What that means is we might discriminate against someone, be prejudiced against them, treat them in a way that is not fair, but it doesn't mean that we injure them. So discrimination has to take place before persecution.

So we need to understand what persecution is. And I want to just say that as Americans, let's be very careful how we use the word 'persecution' today. There are people who are dying because of their faith in Jesus Christ today. There are people who are being enslaved, people who are being brutally injured, beaten, and put in prison. We are not even close to that, so let's just be very careful that we are not going to project ourselves on equal footing with people in other places of the world that are facing persecution.

And I will say this is important because notice how Jesus says, "***Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.***" And then going on into verse 11 it says: "***utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.***" Those two phrases are very important, "***for righteousness sake,***" and "***on my account.***" They mean this – if people treat you harshly because you are a jerk it doesn't mean you are being persecuted. Okay? If you are obnoxious online with your social media and people jab at you back and you think, '*I am just suffering for Jesus.*' No, you are just being an idiot.

So please let's make sure we use that term 'persecution' not for being a jerk, but only if we are doing everything in the spirit of gentleness, kindness, love, grace and truth telling who Jesus is and if people still hate us, then it is persecution. That is being persecuted for the right reasons. I wanted to say all that because I think the question I want to really ask us today is – are you prepared for persecution? Is the church of Jesus Christ in America prepared for persecution? A little bit closer to home – is this church prepared for persecution?

Again, I am not saying it is going to happen, but it is a question of is it possible. It makes me wonder if we are prepared, if we are ready. This week the House of Representatives in Congress passed the Equality Act. If you are familiar with the news of the day maybe you have heard about this, maybe you are aware of what is happening, or maybe you have read about it. I spent some time researching the implications of this bill and I don't want to get into the politics of this, but in essence this bill expands the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to include gender identity and trans identifying people.

Why does this matter? Well, in theory it would gut the protections of the First Amendment of the Constitution protecting the freedom of speech and the freedom of religion for all citizens. And in essence it would create a de facto state ideology. And I would even dare say it would create a state religion for this country. I call this new state ideology and this new state religion bound with sexual secular humanism, bound with

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR  
RIGHTEOUSNESS SAKE  
AGAINST THE GRAIN - Part 9  
Ben Rudolph**

---

sexual secular humanism. And this is what would be in force; it would be the enforced norm in every square inch of public expression, possibly even in churches.

If there ever was a pathway to persecution it begins with this bill. But let me just say this, the problem is not this bill. The problem is this bill represents a belief system. Okay? This bill represents a belief system. I don't want this bill to become law because as a follower of Jesus Christ I believe it goes against my beliefs and my convictions of things. Either the state will be my authority or the Word of God will be my authority. And between those two I am choosing the Word of God every single time. And that is a question we have to ask ourselves.

Again, it is not that I don't want this bill to become law because I hate anyone or I dislike any group of people. I believe that as a follower of Jesus Christ and as someone who believes in God's Word as my authority, I think it is true that all believers are to believe that every human being is worthy of dignity, goodness, kindness and common grace. Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount that God makes the rain fall on the just and the unjust.

Regardless of someone's religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, gender, socioeconomic level, or sexual identity the Bible teaches that we are all image bearers of God. And therefore they are to be treated with the kind of love that Jesus showed all mankind when He walked this earth. Therefore we must remember that we are opposing our government's desire to conform our thinking and conscience into their own image, and we are not necessarily attacking anyone for their personal lifestyle choices.

So how do we get here? How in the world did we get here? Again, this is a whole other sermon and I don't want to spend a lot of time here, but do you guys remember the Sunday after the terrorist attack of 9/11? Do you remember that Sunday? I remember it like it was yesterday. After the attacks of 9/11 on the twin towers in New York City and the attack on the Pentagon, that following Sunday churches around the country were filled. They were filled. And it only lasted one week.

But in the time of national crisis I found it interesting that the soul of our nation still looked to God for answers. Twenty years later I don't know if that would still happen today. The reality is in every generation since World War II, the greatest generation, Christianity has declined. It has decreased in the number of followers, who identify as Christians, and people who identify as evangelicals, and people who believe in the Word and authority of God and His ideals.

So what has happened is Christianity which was once the ideal standard of truth and righteousness and goodness in our society has now eroded, and that void has been replaced by something else. You cannot remove one standard and leave it empty and void. Another standard will be put in its place. And so as much as we as people have

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR  
RIGHTEOUSNESS SAKE  
AGAINST THE GRAIN - Part 9  
Ben Rudolph**

---

removed the standard of God's truth and God's Word from our authority, we have replaced it with something else.

I found it fascinating when I was doing some research that a third of the millennial generation, people that were born between 1981 and 2001, only half of the millennials believe that church is a good influence on society. And a full one third of the millennials believe that church has a negative influence on society. That is fascinating. So that is the reality we find ourselves in. And I believe the reason why Christianity has declined, and the reason why we are seeing this void of truth that has been replaced by another religion has taken place is because of two reasons. And it is not because the problem is out there. The problem is in here, the problem is with us.

We have made two major mistakes and this is just Ben Rudolph talking; it is not God's Word. So you can yell at me if you want to. I am not on social media so you can't yell at me there. If you say something about me this afternoon, I won't know and I won't care. The first reason why Christianity is declining is because every single one of us in this room has abdicated our responsibility to share Jesus with people. We would rather the pastor preach the gospel to people. And we have abdicated our responsibility as followers of Jesus to share the good news, to love our neighbors, and to spread the faith in our neighborhoods, in our schools, and in our homes. We believe in a church-tianity now. We follow God in this room and if I can get people in this room that is great, but if I can't get people in this room my faith lives and dies in this room. While out there we have separated truly walking in our faith on a day by day basis before all mankind. We have hidden it. We have silenced ourselves.

The second problem I think we have is we have put all of our eggs in the wrong basket. Listen, I am not an investment guru, but I have read a few books, and my brother is in the finance world. And I know this, if you want to have a wise strategy for investment you must diversify. And that is because diversity of investments means that if one investment doesn't work out, you still have a bunch of other investments that will work out for you. I believe what the church decided to do forty years ago was to hitch our hope to political power.

We didn't like what was happening and so we saw this erosion from the sexual revolution in the late 50's, 60's and 70's, and we saw abortion become legal in 1973, and there was this shock to the system of the American church. And we saw the deterioration of the biblical ideals that our country once stood for. And instead of looking and getting on our knees and crying out to God, we started believing that if we would elect the right people they would put the right people on the Supreme Court and we would have right judges and we would have all the right systems in place. And these systems if they were controlled by people who held our values would be safe. We put our hope in man's systems and when we put our hope in man's systems we will be disappointed every single time.

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR  
RIGHTEOUSNESS SAKE  
AGAINST THE GRAIN - Part 9  
Ben Rudolph**

---

I am not saying it is wrong to vote for people who hold to our ideals, there is nothing wrong with that. But what happens when the system becomes corrupt, what happens when the system is not working in our benefit anymore? What happens to our hope then? So we have elected how many presidents and how many Congressmen, who have nominated how many Supreme Court judges that hold ideals to our ideals as followers of Jesus? In the forty years that we have done that what has happened to our country? It has become more secular, it has become more anti-God, and the solution that we believed would help us has not been the savior we were looking for.

I am only halfway through this sermon people. So let's go to decisions. Here is what we have to do. We have to make some decisions. If Jesus is calling us, "***Blessed are the persecuted,***" why are we blessed? And how do we handle the possibility of persecution being before us? What must we do? There are two decisions we must make in order to prepare for persecution. Again, I am not an alarmist. I am not saying it is going to happen, but I am saying that if it is going to happen we must be prepared for it. And I believe if we are going to keep making the same mistakes that we have been we will not see a movement of God and we will not see the Spirit of God move in our day, and we will keep seeing a deterioration of people believing and following the right things of Jesus.

So the first decision we need to make is we must change our perspective on persecution. We have to change our perspective on persecution. We have to think differently about persecution. When I was a young person growing up and I thought about persecution or I read about persecution happening in other countries, the first response I had was, '*I am glad I am not there.*' If we are honest we like America. I have been on mission trips where faith is a little more hostile in those environments. And every time I get back to America I am glad I live in this country.

So I think we need to change our perspective because Jesus is teaching us something about persecution and we need to adapt ourselves to His mindset. The Bible says this in Philippians Chapter 2: "***Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus.***" We have to change our perspective and not ask God to change His perspective. '*Come on God, we are Americans. We are free.*' No, we are Christians and if we are Christians first then we must conform to the image of Christ.

So here are a couple of things we need to do. Number one – we must expect persecution. We have to expect it. I love what this passage says in John Chapter 15. This is Jesus' words: "***If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you are of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, remember therefore the world hates you.***" Now this is something that again as the church we must remember. The church years ago had the idea they would be an attractional church. That if we were a church

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR  
RIGHTEOUSNESS SAKE  
AGAINST THE GRAIN - Part 9  
Ben Rudolph**

---

that was nice enough, we were kind enough, we were fun enough, and our messages were general enough that we would get nonbelievers to come in here and just love church.

And I think we bought into that philosophy. And there are many nonbelievers that love church but who do not love Jesus. And we seem to want to appease the world so they will like us. We want Jesus to be popular. We want church to be popular in our world. And guess what – Jesus said it is not going to happen. If you want the world to like Him it is going to be a corrupted version of Him, it won't be the fullness of Him because the world hated Jesus, and if the world hates us because of Him, that is normal.

Look what it says in John Chapter 15 and verse 20. ***“Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ if they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.”*** Listen, this is expected. The expectation that Jesus is preparing His disciples for during His final time of talking to them is to tell them that they are going to be hated; they are going to be harmed. So why do we think we are any different? Why would we expect to have special treatment from God so that we won't get the same treatment that Jesus and His disciples experienced? That is the first way we need to change our perspective of persecution. .

The second way we need to change our perspective is this – we don't have to be afraid of persecution. We don't have to be afraid of it. I think that is one of the most common ways in which we really respond poorly. We are afraid of persecution. We are afraid of people harming us. In Luke Chapter 12 and verses 4 through 5 it says this: ***“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!”***

This is what Jesus is saying. Don't fear the person that can harm your body or hurt your body, because all they can do is harm your body or hurt your emotions and that is temporary. There is someone who is the ultimate judge and that is the person we should really be thinking about. Don't be afraid of what man can do to you; be afraid of what God is going to do to judge all of us. And I think that is one of the things that we have to remember.

I remember having a conversation with a gentleman who worked at a big bank downtown when I was in my old church. We were having a meeting for discipleship, and he looked at me one morning and said he had a question. He said, *‘It is getting hard to be a Christian in my environment. It is really hard. And I just know there is going to be a moment where I am going to have to submit to their ideals and wear pins with flags on it and do things that in my conscience would be a violation. And I am nervous about losing my job and my livelihood.’* And I think of this person now that it has been another four or five years later and I wonder if we feel the same way. *‘If I really push against*

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR  
RIGHTEOUSNESS SAKE  
AGAINST THE GRAIN - Part 9  
Ben Rudolph**

---

*this agenda, what is going to happen to my job?’* And we are afraid of what could happen to us.

If you study someone’s fear responses you will find that there are three ways that most of us will respond to fear. Those three responses are fight, flight or freeze. Have you ever hear that before – fight, flight or freeze? Some of us when we get scared we are like, *‘I don’t like what is happening and I am going to fight back.’* Some of us yell a lot when we are scared. Others of us when we are scared think, *‘I am just going to get out of here. I don’t like what is going on in the world. I am going to pull everything back in and I am not going to talk to my neighbors or my friends anymore. I am taking myself off of social media.’* And some do all these things in order to pull back from life and go into flight mode. We don’t even want to know what is going on in the world.

And then there are those of us who freeze. This is the idea of thinking, *‘I just don’t know what to do. I am frozen. I don’t like what is going on but I don’t know what to do so I am just going to do nothing.’* And when we respond in fear to fight, flight or freeze we do not bring glory to God. Those are not proper ways to deal with our fear because we know from I Timothy that God doesn’t give us a spirit of fear, but of power and love and a sound mind. When we are afraid we are not acting in accordance to the nature of a follower of Jesus because of what man can do to us. We have to stop turning inward when fear hits.

The third change in our perspective is we need to realize that we are free people. We have to remember that we are free. It doesn’t matter what laws they pass. They can pass all the laws they want saying you can’t do this and you are not allowed to do that. As followers of Jesus, and with the Word of God as our authority, we need to realize that man’s laws are only as good as how they align to the Bible. And Scripture is clear in telling us that every time that man makes a law that violates the Word of God we are free to say, *‘I don’t have to obey that, because there is a higher law, and there is a higher authority that I am responsible to.’* So I am free even though they may pass whatever laws they want.

I love the story of Daniel and the lion’s den. There were men that hated Daniel and his faith and they hated that Daniel prayed to his God. So they persuaded the king to pass a law saying everyone could only pray to the king for a certain time period. And I love Daniel’s response to that new law. Now Daniel was a high ranking official, so it was not like he thought, *‘Oh my goodness. I can’t believe they passed that law,’* because he was fully aware of what they were doing. He was fully aware of their scheming, he was fully aware of their hatred for him, but the moment that the king put his signet ring on that decree, on that very day Daniel walked to his house, he opened up his windows, he got on his knees, and he prayed to God just like before. That is what Daniel did because he was a free man. It didn’t matter what kind of law was passed, he was free. And we are free as well. We are free under God to not obey laws that violate the Word

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR  
RIGHTEOUSNESS SAKE  
AGAINST THE GRAIN - Part 9  
Ben Rudolph**

---

of God, and we have to remember that. Our authority and our allegiance have to be always in Jesus Christ, the king of kings and the Lord of Lords.

Number four – we don't have to let it rob our hope. I Peter is a phenomenal book. It was written to a persecuted people. In fact most of the New Testament was written to people under persecution. This was the norm for followers of Jesus. In I Peter Chapter 3 and verses 13 through 15 it says this: ***“Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed,”*** and that is almost the exact wording of our Beatitude this morning. ***“Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”***

The hope that is in you - see our hope is not in whether or not we will be mistreated or not, our hope is not in hoping we will never get persecuted. That is not our hope. Our hope is in the belief that God will do all things for His glory, that He will do all things right, and He will do all things good. Our hope is in God and not in man. Our hope is in God's system not in man's system. Our hope is in how God will treat us not how man will treat us. And so hope should never die no matter what happens, no matter what the world does to us, no matter what laws are passed; we always can have hope.

I was thinking about this the other day, and the reason why that Luke Chapter 12 passage is so important is because He tells us not to fear what man can do to us, because they can only kill the body. The reality is this – all persecution, all discrimination, anything that man can do to us is only temporary. It is not eternal. And if we look at it like that it changes our perspective. I have met so many Christians who have a fatalistic idea about the world and about our country. We have to stop being fatalistic. We serve the God of the universe who makes nations rise and fall, people groups come and go, governments change and are overturned, and man's systems come and go all the time. But what never changes, what is always advancing, what is always growing is the kingdom of God. And that is where our allegiance is to be, that is what our hope is in. If America falls but the kingdom of God advances will we say *‘Hallelujah’*? That is what we have to ask ourselves. We are so concerned about our money, our wealth, and our systems and about wanting America to be great; but what if America is not supposed to be great. Jesus is supposed to be great; isn't that enough for us? No one can steal our hope because our hope is in one who rose from the dead.

Lastly, how we can change our perspective is we need to understand Jesus better and deeper. Read with me in I Peter Chapter 4 and verses 12 through 14 where it says this: ***“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”*** So when bad things happen to you as Christians who are following Jesus and people don't like you, they discriminate

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR  
RIGHTEOUSNESS SAKE  
AGAINST THE GRAIN - Part 9  
Ben Rudolph**

---

against you, they talk evil against you and you are treated unjustly so that you feel persecuted - don't be surprised.

Why are we not supposed to be surprised? Look what it says in verse 13: *“But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”* It is almost as if Peter was writing this entire letter based on that one phrase that Jesus gave, *“Blessed are those who are persecuted.”* And this is Peter’s whole point – when we suffer for the name of Jesus we get to know what Jesus felt like. We really get to know what Jesus felt like.

There is a deepness of understanding the heart of God, there is a deepness of understanding when we get to walk in the same way that Jesus walked because He was perfect and He loved perfectly. He treated people perfectly and yet people still hated Him, they reviled Him and they persecuted Him. The story, the narrative of those eight statements, those eight Beatitudes, is the story of Jesus. Jesus became poor for us, He took on human flesh and He died in persecution.

Listen we have a great opportunity when we are afraid, when we lose hope with all the things that are going on, to remember how Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before Him. There was joy in Jesus’ heart as He went to the cross. Yes, there He suffered anguish, He suffered pain, but He also had joy. And if we don’t understand the joy of approaching persecution we don’t understand Jesus. And the problem is not with God; it is with us. We need to change our thinking, we need to stop being so fearful and being hopeless. We need to understand that persecution may be one of the greatest ways in which we can learn how to love and walk with Jesus. That is the opportunity that God gives to us.

But not only do we need to change our minds, but we need to change the way we live. I will have to go briefly and quickly through this and I am sorry for taking so long. But we need to choose our path before persecution. We have to decide how we are going to live today no matter what laws are passed. No matter if that equality law is passed and then fails in the courts, I don’t care. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter if there is going to be progress by which persecution does come. There is a pathway for all of us today based on what the Word of God says. And here is the path we must choose.

Number one - we must fear God and not man. I love the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. I think there are many parallels that we can find our identities in from the Jewish people in the Bible. What happened to the Jewish people was they were in Judah, they had their temple, they had their laws, they had their kings, and when God sent judgment on that nation He put them into exile. And here is what I know about the people of God, the history of the Jewish people; before the exile they always struggled with monotheism. They worshipped all these other gods. They prayed to Baal

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR  
RIGHTEOUSNESS SAKE  
AGAINST THE GRAIN - Part 9  
Ben Rudolph**

---

and to Asherah, and they always struggled with worshipping all these other gods instead of worshipping the one true God.

And God sent them for seventy years into exile where there was no temple, there were no priests, there wasn't a righteous king of David's lineage. There were no systems for the Jewish religion. And after seventy years in captivity they came back to their homeland and then they never struggled again with worshipping the one true God. It took seventy years of exile for them to get rid of their love for other gods and to worship again the one true God.

And when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were in exile they were told they must bow down before the king's statue or they would die. And they would not bow down. There were thousands of people bowing down with only three guys just standing there. Nebuchadnezzar is furious and their response to him was, *'We don't really care if you kill us. You can throw us in the furnace. Our God could save us - but even if He doesn't we are not bowing down to you or to that statue.'* Wow, that is a group of men who knew what it was like to fear God. And it was not that they were afraid of God, but that they loved God so much that they chose to obey Him rather than the king.

To fear God means the only opinion that you care about is God's. What if we all lived like that? What if we lived as people who only cared about what God thought of us and not what the masses on social media think, or the people around us think. Now I know that is risky, but it is something we must do.

Number two – courageously connect and confront. Tim Keller has just written a book called 'How to Reach the West Again.' It is a phenomenal read of only fifty pages and it can be downloaded for free. I would encourage all of you to read it. And in this book Keller talks about this idea of connecting and confronting. We need to be Christians that stop turning inward to our little huddles and learn how to connect again. We need to connect to nonbelievers, and in order to do that we must not sacrifice the truth. When Jesus came He came full of grace and truth. And I realize that takes courage. It takes courage to leave our comfort zones and to pursue community. It takes courage to step out, it takes courage to invite people over to our homes, and it takes courage to meet with people who don't agree with us or believe the same things that we do. But we have to be courageous and connect.

Let me just say this – we all need to connect more. If you are not a part of a Life Community, if you are not a part of a Small Group, if you are not a part of a local church, you are missing out on life together. The reason what the church has always been able to withstand the systematic attacks against the Christian faith is because Christians have stuck together. And it is so easy for us as American Christians to live life on our own. We don't need anyone and we like our rugged individualism. There are some good things to that and some bad things to that. The reality is that many of us live our

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR  
RIGHTEOUSNESS SAKE  
AGAINST THE GRAIN - Part 9  
Ben Rudolph**

---

Christian faith by thinking, ‘*My walk is with Jesus alone,*’ and we are not attached to the body, we are not attached to a Small Group, and we don’t depend on one another. And when persecution comes we feel alone. We need to connect deeper to the body of Christ. We need to connect more with people who don’t know Jesus. We have to stop turning inward.

Number three – we have to be a person of blessing. In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew Chapter 5 listen to what He says beginning in verse 43: ***“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”***

Here is this idea of loving people, to be a blessing to people. When people treat you harshly, when they say unkind things to you, when they treat you unjustly, you are to turn that cursing into blessing. Christians, we need to be known as people who bless. I love what it says in Jeremiah Chapter 29 which was written to the exiles that are in Babylon. These were the people whose system was completely upended. They no longer had a king, they no longer had a temple, they no longer could sacrifice so what are they supposed to do? How are they supposed to live during these 70 years of exile? They wanted to shut themselves off because out there it was mean and dark with lots of bad people that hated God and His ways. They wanted to just stay together and isolate themselves.

And that is not what God said through Jeremiah in Chapter 29 to His people in exile. Listen beginning in verse 4 where it says: ***“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”***

We must be people of blessing. We must learn how to bless our community, bless our neighbors, and bless our friends. We are not to treat people the way they treat us, but with the way of God’s grace. His people are to bless and not curse. We have to get out of our holy huddles and start thinking about ways that we can love and bless the people around us.

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR  
RIGHTEOUSNESS SAKE  
AGAINST THE GRAIN - Part 9  
Ben Rudolph**

---

Number four – we have to intentionally and consistently disciple the next generation. I am sorry that I don't have enough time to talk about this, but the reality is this – what our children need is not necessarily the knowledge about the Bible, what our children need is to see the older generation living out their faith in a dynamic way. They need to see parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents and youth leaders who are showing them outside of these walls what it looks like to be a follower of Jesus in everyday life. If our next generation only hears about God, only gets to know about God in these walls that will be why the next generation will be less Christian than this generation. We have to change the way we think about how we disciple. I am going to say that there are a whole bunch of young children in Kid Life, there are a whole bunch of students in Student Life, and they need adults who will teach them and show them what it means to follow Jesus. Parents, as well as the rest of us, must invest in the next generation.

My last point is this – if we are going to fight, let us fight on our knees. We will only see darkness overcome by the light of Jesus Christ. We have to stop trusting in man's system and stop trusting in man to deliver us. When the children of Israel were under persecution and were at the mercy of Pharaoh they cried out to the Lord, and the Lord heard their cries. Every single time the people of God have been in distress, have been attacked, have been maligned, have been persecuted, their first option, their first choice was to pray. We have to start being a people of prayer.

We had a prayer night here and I was so happy to see sixty people in this room praying. The next time we have a prayer night we should have three hundred people in this room. Not because we want big numbers, but because we are that desperate to see God move. I am forty-five years old and I have yet to see a movement of God. I have read about them, I have heard about them, I have studied movements, but I have yet to see one. And it is because we are so concerned about our own lives, or maybe we are so enslaved, or so fearful, but we have to learn how to cry out to God. We need to pray, *'God, unless you save us, we will not be saved.'* And I am not talking about God saving our nation, I am asking God to save His people. I am not interested in America being great again; I am interested in the name and the glory of Jesus Christ being spread across our land. There is a difference in how we pray. What are we asking God for? How are we praying? How we pray says what we believe.

That is all I have. (*Applause.*) I don't even know how I want to end this, but I just know this - we need to see God again. I want to see God again. I am tired of just doing church, I am tired of fighting battles, I am tired of people complaining about masks, and I am tired of talking about elections. There is something greater at work that God wants to do. Let's stop being distracted and let's start believing and praying and crying out to God to do something.

*The preceding transcript was completed using raw audio recordings. As much as possible, it includes the actual words of the message with minor grammatical changes and editorial clarifications to provide context. Hebrew and Greek words are spelled using Google Translator and the actual spelling may be different in some cases.*