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In the spring of 2001, we received an email from Christians in Iran, who found BBC through our web site, they were contacting churches in the US and requested that we send sermon tapes to them for use in Iran. They specifically asked for prayer, the tapes, and that we not send money because that would be dangerous for them nor should we email them. The Mission Board supported their request, which was the most specific, concrete, non-financial request we've received. A short time later we received an email saying to stop sending tapes, that someone had sent them money; they were going to court, then to prison. They said they would contact us again when they were able to. We've never heard from them again.

Jesus said (Matthew 5:10-12),
*"**Blessed** are those who are **persecuted** for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

***Blessed** are you when people 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 in the same way they **persecuted** the prophets who were before you."*

As we have been exploring the Beatitudes in worship I have said they are statements about the availability of the kingdom of heaven even for people who think their condition may exclude them from the kingdom or cut them off from a good life or the blessing of God. Jesus is saying in all of them *"The condition doesn't keep you from the kingdom, in fact, there is a promise for each of you."*

The promise connected with persecution on account of Jesus is the kingdom of heaven and a great reward in heaven.

This theme is far more relevant and powerful for Christians in the two-thirds world and in developing nations than it is for those of us in the United States because they are far more likely to face the kinds of persecution Jesus describes in the gospels and that we see in the New Testament. However, it is important for us to understand what other people have gone through and are

going through because they are following Jesus. Those who are persecuted are often looked down upon in their community. They may lose their jobs, their prestige or status, their possessions, their freedom, their family and at times even their lives. People may wonder – *“What did they get for their suffering? What was the point? Was it worth it?”* Rather than lamenting persecution, evil, and slander done to believers on account of their relationship with him, Jesus says to *“Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven.”*

When the disciples began testifying and preaching about Jesus in Jerusalem, Peter and John were arrested (Acts 4:3-31). Released the next day, the apostles continued to preach and the Holy Spirit was doing signs and wonders through them, and more believers were added to the Lord. Acts 5:12-42 is an illustration of this beatitude, it concludes with Peter and John being flogged and ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus. What would our response be to being arrested twice, ordered to be silent, and beaten for sharing and practicing our faith? Peter and the apostles responded this way (Acts 5:41-42): *“As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.”*

Persecution is more likely to be a part of a Christian’s experience if, like the first followers of Jesus, they live in a country or under a government that is hostile to Christianity. In Vacation Bible School this past week, one of the stories the kids learned about was Paul and Silas who were put in prison because they were sharing their faith in Jesus (Acts 16). While in prison they prayed and sang hymns to God. Thousands upon thousands of Christians have been imprisoned ever since. The September/October 2004 edition of *Today’s Christian* included the article, *“China—Where God Is Behind Bars,”* in which Chinese Christian leader Brother Zhong tells this story: “I was attending a training course for my house church network’s council members and youth leaders. The Public Security Bureau (PSB) raided us the first day. All the leaders were arrested. The prison authorities shaved our heads and interrogated us. We were warned that the hardened inmates would beat us. So

with much trepidation, another brother and I entered our cell. We were greeted by the sight of 16 other inmates, lined up in two rows and thumping their fists. My heart beat rapidly as I sent prayers up to God.

The leader of the gang asked, "*Why are you here?*"

"Because we are Christians," I replied.

"You don't beat people up?" "No," I assured him.

"Do you sing?" "Yes," I answered.

The leader ordered me to sing a song. I wept as I sang. The Holy Spirit moved in our midst, and by the time I finished singing, every prisoner was also in tears. To my shock, the gang leader then asked to hear the gospel. After that, my cellmates hungered to hear the gospel every day. One Sunday, we held a worship service. The prison guard demanded to know who was behind it. He threatened to punish everyone if no one spoke up. I stood up and confessed.

I was forced to remove my clothes and stand at an inclined angle to the wall.

The gang leader couldn't bear it anymore. He asked to be punished with me. All the others volunteered to do the same. The infuriated guard stormed out. I was moved by my cellmates' act. One of them, who had been there for three years, became a believer that day."

One of the major challenges of all human history is the interaction within and between people of different faiths that often leads to persecution. Even America, which we like to believe is a land of religious freedom, began as a place of incredible religious division, not just between the Europeans and the Native Americans, but even among even those who were primarily English. In colonial New England, religious persecution was part of life. Roger Williams was driven out of/fled Massachusetts and founded Rhode Island colony in pursuit of religious liberty. He wrote about the importance of religious liberty and toleration in a peaceful society in *The Bloody Tenant of Persecution* (1644):

"It is the will and command of God that, since the coming of his Son, the Lord Jesus, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or antichristian

consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries: and they are only to be fought against with that sword which is only, in soul matters, able to conquer: to wit, the sword of God's Spirit, the Word of God.

“God requires not a uniformity of religion to be enacted and enforced in any civil state; (which) enforced uniformity, sooner or later, is the greatest occasion of civil war, ravishing of conscience, persecution of Christ Jesus in his servants, and of the hypocrisy and destruction of millions of souls. The permission of other consciences and worships than a state professeth only can, according to God, procure a firm and lasting peace. ...”¹

In other words, all kinds of worship should be allowed in a free society and the only means a Christian is to use to fight for one's faith is the Word of God. Enforced uniformity of religion never leads to genuine faith; rather it leads to civil war, persecution, hypocrisy, and destruction. This has been demonstrated countless times throughout history. Intolerance of and contempt for people of different faiths is a major issue in world religions and increasingly within and between nations.

In *By Their Blood* James and Marti Hefley write:

In the 19th century Protestant evangelical missionaries brought the gospel to the Armenians with stirring freshness. This precipitated an evangelical renewal movement within the staid old Armenian Church. At that time much of Armenia was under a Turkish Muslim government and conversion of a Muslim to Christianity was punishable by instant death. This law was suddenly lifted in 1856 and complete religious liberty declared. Scores of Muslims became Christians.

The opportunity proved to be short lived. In 1864 the Turkish government began rounding up and sentencing to prison Muslim converts to Christianity. From 1895 to 1896 government soldiers killed up to 100,000 Armenian civilians. In the spring an attempt was made to kill every Armenian Christian within Turkish borders. Lawyers, doctors, clergymen, and other intellectuals were rounded up and charged with subversion.

¹ “The Baptists: A People Who Gathered 'to Walk in All His Ways,’” *Christian History*, no. 6.

April 24 was the day set to kill the rest of the Armenians. As many as 600,000 may have died on that fatal April 24. One of those who escaped was a young girl of 18 who stumbled into an American camp.

“Are you in pain?” a nurse asked when she arrived.

“No,” she replied, “but I have learned the meaning of the cross.”

The nurse thought she was mentally disoriented and questioned her further.

Pulling down the one garment she wore, the young girl exposed a bare shoulder.

There, burned deeply into her flesh, was the figure of a cross.

“I was caught with others in my village. The Turks stood me up and asked, ‘Muhammed or Christ?’ I said, ‘Christ, always Christ.’ For seven days they asked me this same question and each day when I said ‘Christ’ a part of this cross was burned into my shoulder. On the seventh day they said, ‘Tomorrow if you say “Muhammed” you live.

If not, you die.’ Then we heard that Americans were near and some of us escaped.

That is how I learned the meaning of the cross.”²

Jesus shared this beatitude about persecution at the beginning of his ministry because he didn’t want his followers surprised by persecution because he knew it would happen as a result of their faith in him. **Persecution may be part of faithful Christian living, but that doesn't mean we are forsaken or not blessed by God, on the contrary, it may be because of our faithfulness in living and proclaiming the gospel.**

In John 15:20 Jesus says, “Remember the word that I said to you, ‘Servants are not greater than their master.’ ***If they persecuted me, they will persecute you.***”

Helen Roseveare is a British medical doctor who worked for many years as a missionary in Zaire. During the revolution of the 1960s, she often faced brutal beatings and other forms of physical torture. On one occasion, when she was about to be executed, she feared God had forsaken her. In that moment, she sensed the Holy Spirit saying to her: *Twenty years ago you asked me for the*

² Marti Hefley, *By Their Blood* (Baker, 1996), p. 342

privilege of being identified with me. This is it. Don't you want it? This is what it means. These are not your sufferings; they are my sufferings. All I ask of you is the loan of your body.

The privilege of serving Christ through her sufferings overwhelmed Dr. Roseveare. After she was delivered, she wrote about her experience with God: *"He didn't stop the sufferings. He didn't stop the wickedness, the cruelties, the humiliation or anything. It was all there. The pain was just as bad. The fear was just as bad. But it was altogether different. It was in Jesus, for him, with him."*³ In John 16:33 Jesus says to his disciples, ***"In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!"***

All around the world Christians are facing extreme challenges: moving meeting locations to avoid local authorities, being jailed for their faith, threatened and beaten to renounce Jesus. Most of us will probably never encounter the dilemmas and persecution these Christians face every day. Religious persecution is not just a part of ancient Christian history; it is a significant part of our contemporary world. Frankly, too many American Christians think they are suffering persecution simply because they don't get their own way, they can't find a parking space, someone is sitting in "their" pew or because the worship service goes more than 60 minutes. If we hear snide remarks about our faith, when people look down their noses at us, when people make false judgments about us because we are Christians, remember this is nothing new for followers of Jesus.

How are Christians to respond to persecution? Paul says (2 Corinthians 4:8-10),
"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; **persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;** always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies."
(1 Corinthians 4:12), **"When reviled we bless; when persecuted, we endure."**

³ Philip Ryken, *The Message of Salvation* (Inter-Varsity Press, 2001).

In the 1930s in Stavropol, Russia, Stalin ordered that all Bibles be confiscated and Christian believers be sent to prison camps. Ironically, most of the Bibles were not destroyed, yet many Christians died as “enemies of the state.” With the dissolution of the U.S.S.R., a CoMission team arrived in Stavropol in 1994 for ministry. Their request to have Bibles shipped to Moscow was being held up. But someone told them about a warehouse outside of town where confiscated Bibles were still stored. Remarkably, the team was granted permission to distribute them. Hiring several local Russian workers, they began to load their trucks. One young man, a hostile agnostic, came only for the day's wages. But not long after they had started, he disappeared. He was found in the corner of the warehouse, weeping, a Bible in his hands. Intending to steal it for himself, he had picked his own grandmother's off the shelf! Her signature was on the front page. Today, that Russian is in the process of being transformed by the very Bible that his grandmother was persecuted for, but still held dear.⁴ It is important to value the Bible, it is even more important to read it, learn from it, and seek to live what it teaches.

This Tuesday, August 9, 2005, will mark the 60th anniversary of the bombing of Nagasaki, Japan. What you may not realize is that Nagasaki was the center of Japanese Christianity. A substantial Christian community had survived three centuries of persecution. They worshipped underground and endured martyrdom. They were only allowed to live their faith in public at the turn of the century. Then, in 60 seconds, they were wiped out. Takashi Nagai, who lost his wife in the blast and who later died from the effects of radiation, said of the 8,000 Christians who died instantly in the blast, *“Let us give thanks that through this sacrifice, peace was given to the world and freedom of religion to Japan.”*⁵ Can you imagine being able to give thanks if you were in his place?

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:26, *“If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.”* What can we do to

⁴ Ken Taylor, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 33, no. 5.

⁵ The Wilberforce Forum, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 33, no. 6.

help Christians who are facing persecution? We can give money to support the work of people like our American Baptist missionaries who help persecuted Christians. We can support the work of Christian groups getting Bibles into the hands of Christians in restricted countries. During worship at our church we can remember how other people are suffering just to be in a church service. We can read more and become more aware of what is happening to Christians in other parts of the world. We can pray for our sisters and brothers in the faith who are facing persecution in countries like Saudi Arabia, Peru, Pakistan, Vietnam, Mexico, Sudan, and Uzbekistan just to name a few.

If people give us a hard time because we are Christians, it's helpful to remember Jesus tells his followers that those who are reviled, persecuted, or spoken evil of because of their faith stand in a long line of faithful people including the prophets in the Old Testament, Jesus himself, and the followers of Jesus from that day all the way to the present. 2 Timothy 3:12 soberly reminds us,

"Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

Persecution may be part of faithful Christian living, but that doesn't mean we are forsaken or not blessed by God, on the contrary, it may be because of our faithfulness to living and proclaiming the gospel and Jesus says, the reward for those who are persecuted will be significant. When Texas pastor Jim Denison was in college, he served as a summer missionary in East Malaysia. While there he attended a small church. At one of the church's worship services, a teenage girl came forward to announce her decision to follow Christ and be baptized. During the service, Denison noticed some worn-out luggage leaning against the wall of the church building. He asked the pastor about it.

The pastor pointed to the girl who had just been baptized and told Denison, *"Her father said that if she was baptized as a Christian she could never go home again. So she brought her luggage."*⁶

In Mark 10:29-31, *"Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters, or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for*

⁶ Raymond McHenry, *Stories for the Soul* (Hendrickson, 2001), p. 48.

*the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, **and fields with persecutions** - and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”*

May God help us to live out our faith in our generation.

Blessing: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.”

Romans 12:14

More on Persecution:

Matthew 10:16-23, *“See I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”*

In explaining the meaning of the his parable of the sower (Matthew 13:18-23), Jesus says the seed that is *“sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet such a person has no root, but endures for a while, and **when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.**”*

Psalms 10:2, *“In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor – let them be caught in the schemes they have devised.”*

Psalms 119:84,86b, *“How long must your servant endure? When will you judge those who persecute me? I am persecuted without cause; help me!”*

In Acts 8:1, 11:19, 13:50, and 20:23 persecution fueled the growth of the church.

Romans 8:35

2 Corinthians 12:10

1 Thessalonians 3:3-7

2 Thessalonians 1:4

2 Timothy 3:11-12

*Hebrews 10:32-36

Revelation 1:9

Persecution is still going on in the world and you may wish to check out a number of sites online that communicate about the persecution of Christians today including:

www.opendoorsusa.org a nondenominational Christian ministry that serves Christians worldwide who are persecuted for their faith in Jesus by delivering Bibles, offering pastoral and leadership training, and supporting literacy and vocational training.

www.Persecution.org that serves the victims of Christian persecution and supports the training of underground pastors.

www.persecutedchurch.com.

www.Persecution.com is the web site of The Voice of the Martyrs.

According to the Bible League (www.BibleLeague.org), in southern Sudan, almost every copy of the Bible was destroyed during more than 20 years of fighting.