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Blessed are the Persecuted



Individual Topics - Steve Gregg

In his talk, Steve Gregg discusses the final Beatitude - "blessed are the persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven". He explains that being blessed does not necessarily equate to feeling happy, but rather being enviable, fortunate, and happy for a good reason. Persecution for righteousness sake refers to standing up for what is right in the eyes of God, even if it means making oneself publicly outspoken about it or simply refusing to participate in sinful activities. Gregg emphasizes the importance for Christians to be prepared to suffer for the sake of Christ and not be afraid to pray for boldness to stand firm in the face of persecution.

Transcript

The last of the Beatitudes in the list is verse 10, Matthew 5, 10. And blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Now this is the only beatitude that Jesus goes a little longer on and personalizes it.

Because all the beatitudes are generic. Blessed are the meek, whoever they may be. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, whoever they may be.

Blessed are those who are persecuted, whoever they may be. Then he personalizes it in verses 11 and 12. Now blessed are you.

So it's now looking at the disciples straight on and saying, okay, this applies to you especially when they revile you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

So he didn't have that kind of extended application on any of the other beatitudes, but this one I guess he's putting personal emphasis on. Now we saw that in each of the beatitudes, a beatitude begins with the word blessed, which means enviable or fortunate, happy, or having grounds for being happy. A person who's blessed doesn't always feel happy necessarily.

After all, one who's persecuted isn't always feeling happy about it. Or those who mourn

don't particularly feel happy, but they have occasion to be happy. That's what blessed means.

They ought to be happy. There's reasons to be happy. They are enviable people.

They are fortunate because of something. Now he gave eight categories, which are all the same people, the disciples. The disciples of Jesus are the pure in heart, and they are the poor in spirit, and they are those who mourn, and they are those who are persecuted, and so forth.

They are the peacemakers. But each time he mentions one of these qualities, he mentions a particular reason why those who have these qualities are blessed. It's not an irrational statement.

It sounds, what should we say, counterintuitive. Blessed are those who mourn? Really? Blessed are those who are persecuted? Doesn't seem like it. But it's counterintuitive, but it's rational because there's good reasons to count yourself fortunate.

If you're poor in spirit, yours is the kingdom of heaven, which is a pearl of great price, worth more than all the wealth of the world. So you're very wealthy if you are poor in spirit and have the kingdom. Those who mourn don't seem very happy, but they will be comforted.

Not everyone is guaranteed that if they are not, as Jesus was implying here, mourning for the right reasons. Mourning over your sins, mourning over sin in general in the world, grieved, like God is grieved over sin. If you share in his heart, you'll share in his comfort.

You'll be comforted. Those who are meek will inherit the earth. That's just a restatement of Psalm 37 that says the meek shall inherit the earth.

But Jesus said, blessed are you meek, blessed are the meek, because they will inherit the earth. That's a pretty big inheritance there. And that's a fortunate position to be in.

Those who hunger and thirst, he said, are going to be satisfied. They'll be filled. And of course, people who, that is if they hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Most people don't seem to hunger and thirst for righteousness. They hunger and thirst for comfort or fame or money or security or something, and there's no guarantee that people with that hunger will be filled. You can pursue anything in the world, and you might get it, but you might not.

There's no guarantees. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, it's guaranteed. They will be, their hunger will be satisfied.

They will be filled. And so also, the merciful will obtain mercy. And in a sense, only they will, because he goes on to say later in the Sermon on the Mount, if you don't forgive

others, God won't forgive you.

So if you're not merciful to other people, you know, God won't be merciful to you. In James, it says, James actually takes the merciful beatitude and restates it in an interesting way, that he basically indicates that only the merciful are going to receive mercy. Let me find the way James states that.

Is it 3, what? 2.13. 2.13? Thank you. You have it in your notes from when I taught it. Yeah.

That is it. James 2.13 is, for judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Okay? So the person who has not been merciful will not receive mercy.

Judgment will be merciless for those who are merciless, is what it's saying. And mercy triumphs over judgment. So you want to have mercy from God? You've got to be a merciful person.

If you are a merciful person, you're blessed, because you do obtain God's mercy. Those who are pure in heart will see God. That certainly is a unique privilege.

And blessed are those, and blessed are the peacemakers, they will be called the sons of God. We talked about that a couple weeks ago. And now we're on blessed are those who are persecuted for righteous sake, but the interesting thing here is when he gives the reason, it's the same reason that was in the first beatitude.

Theirs is the kingdom of heaven. So he's come full circle. He's kind of wrapped it up to kind of, this is I think probably a way of saying this is a full circle because it includes everybody who's of all these categories.

The disciples are supposed to be all these things. The disciples are meek, pure in heart, poor in spirit, merciful, peacemakers, and all that, and persecuted. And theirs, the greatest privilege of them all, is that which he mentions first and last, is theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

And notice that's the only one that's in the present tense. All the others, they shall be satisfied. They shall be called the sons of God.

They shall obtain mercy. They shall, in some time in the future, but theirs is now the kingdom. We are recipients of and participants in the kingdom of God if we are Christ's disciples.

And that's what he's saying. That's the greatest privilege of all. And what we call people to who are not Christians, when we call them to Christ, is to be part of that kingdom.

To have a king. To acknowledge the king. And to live as under a king.

That's being in his kingdom. And we possess that kingdom, which is, as Jesus said, like a pearl of great price, like a treasure hidden in a field. Worth everything.

And so there's the blessedness of it. Now, since we talked before about what it means to say theirs is the kingdom of heaven, let's talk about the blessed, those who are persecuted for righteous sake. Now, not all suffering is persecution, necessarily.

And not all persecution is for righteousness sake. Persecution is when somebody picks on you because they don't like you for some reason. Now it's entirely possible to deserve it.

It's entirely possible to be somebody who is unlikable, to be obnoxious. And if you're persecuted for that reason, don't boast in your blessedness. That doesn't apply in such a case.

It's when you're persecuted because of your stand for righteousness. Blessed, you're persecuted for righteousness sake. And then when Jesus gives the explanation in verse 11, he says, and for my sake.

So there's two aspects of this, but they're not unrelated. To stand up for Jesus is to stand up for righteousness. And remember, righteousness is the same thing as justice in the Bible, the Greek word.

And so, when you stand for what's just and right in the sight of God, and you get persecuted for it, well, that's what he's talking about. You are doing that for Jesus' sake. Apparently, to stand for Jesus' sake and be persecuted for his sake involves that you are standing up, in some sense, making yourself publicly outspoken for what's right, for righteousness, for justice.

And it may be that you're not even speaking it out so much, because you can be persecuted for righteousness without saying a word, if you're just refusing to live like your neighbors, refusing to live like the people who you used to hang out with, the people you're not partying the same anymore, you're not doing the same sinful things anymore. Just not doing those things is pursuing a course of righteousness that can get you, obviously, persecuted. Now, last time we were talking about this persecution is to be seen not as merely a personal matter.

Being a Christian isn't strictly a personal matter. It's got a personal aspect, obviously. Everyone has to have a personal relationship with Christ if they're a Christian.

But when you have a personal relationship with Christ, this relationship is defined within a larger entity, the body of Christ, for one thing, but also what's called the kingdom of God, that you are a citizen of another world. You're a citizen of heaven. Paul said in Philippians chapter three, our citizenship is in heaven.

And so, we really belong to another society. The kingdom of God is an alternative society under King Jesus, and it was very obviously so in the book of Acts at the beginning. The Christians were called out of their old way of life, lived a new way of life, it was very visible, not just individually, but as a corporate family, the family of God.

The church was seen corporately as a society very different than the other societies. They had different values. They had different pursuits.

And when you take a different pursuit and uphold different values than the people who are not Christians, some of them can handle it okay, some of them don't handle it well. The more snowflakey people get, the more they can't handle somebody disagreeing with them about something, even if you're not criticizing them. If you just disagree, they're going to be angry at you.

Now, Revelation 12, we saw last time, we won't look at it again today, it talked about the battle of Satan making war against the woman and her offspring, which is referring to, I think, the spiritual battle between the kingdom of Satan and the kingdom of God. Jesus is the one who identified that friction between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. Did I say heaven a moment ago? Between the kingdom of Satan and the kingdom of God.

Jesus identified that conflict when he was accused of casting out demons in the name of Beelzebub. And he said, I'm casting out demons by the spirit of God. And he said, Beelzebub, if Satan is casting out demons, then his kingdom will not stand, Jesus said.

Satan's going to destroy his own kingdom if he's casting out his own soldiers. But he said, but if I'm casting out demons by the spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. So the reason there's something going on here you're trying to explain is there's a war that you can't see going on.

And there's a war between the kingdom of Satan, and he's not going to oppose himself. He's opposed to me, Jesus, but he's not opposed to himself. And I, Jesus, am casting out demons by the spirit of God, because that's the mark of the invasion of the kingdom of God into Satan's territory.

And there's a clash here. And that's why there's persecution. You don't have to take it so personally.

You know, it's people hate you not for your sake. Well, if they do hate you for your sake, you may be their fault. But if they hate you for Jesus' sake, it's because they're part of one kingdom pressing for a certain agenda, and you're part of another kingdom pressing in the same territory for a different agenda, for the glory of God.

You're here to promote the glory of God. They're here to more or less, you know, suppress it. And so this is why there's a conflict.

This is why there's persecution. In the Old Testament, we see it right from the early days, Cain and Abel. And by the way, in 1 John, John talks about Cain and Abel as sort of a paradigm of us, sort of a prototype, I should say, of the persecution of Christians.

In 1 John, chapter 3, 1 John 3, verse 10, in this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest. You can tell the difference. Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God.

Now when you practice righteousness, you may end up being persecuted for righteousness' sake, because your enemy is not in favor of righteousness. But whoever practices righteous, whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. For this is the message that we heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, not as Cain, who was of the wicked one, and murdered his brother.

And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brothers were righteous. So Abel, he says, was persecuted because his works were righteous, persecuted for righteousness' sake. And Cain was not righteous, he was of the wicked one.

He was in the devil's kingdom. And so you've got the two kingdoms confronting each other here, Satan's loyalists and those who are pursuing the righteousness of God. And Cain and Abel are the first prototypes of this, and actually the first humans born on the planet.

And so this conflict is seen right from the beginning, and it goes right on to the end, until every principality in power and every enemy has been put down. Christ must reign until he's put all his enemies under his feet, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15. So this is a battle that we are in the middle of.

When you became, when you're born on the earth, before you were even a Christian, you were born into a battle zone. When you became a Christian, you became consciously engaged in the battle. And the people that are not Christians, whether they know of the battle or not, they just don't feel comfortable with people who are on the other side.

And they are, of course, they're mainly dupes. They're not really consciously intending to be evil. They're just basically deceived by the enemy in most cases, although some do choose to be evil.

That the Messiah would be persecuted is an Old Testament theme, and the prophets were persecuted. David, remember, he was persecuted. Joseph was persecuted by his brothers.

All of these people were persecuted by people who really had no valid complaint against them. Why would Saul pursue David? David was a hero. David was the one who saved

the nation.

In a sense, he kept Saul on the throne by saving the nation, by killing Goliath. But David got a little bit too much appreciation from the people for Saul's tastes. And so Saul pursued him, and they should have been great compatriots in the battle against the Philistines.

But instead, Saul, being evil, and by the way, being demonized because an evil spirit came upon him, was pursuing and persecuting David who had the spirit of God on him. The spirit of God, when Samuel anointed David, the spirit came on David and left Saul, and an evil spirit came on Saul, the Bible says. So you've got a demon-possessed king and a Holy Spirit-possessed king, and representing the two sides of the spiritual battle.

Just like Cain killed Abel, Saul pursued David. And this is the kind of thing you see all the time in the Bible, in history, frankly, not just the Bible. But Jesus said that because of this, persecution is going to be inevitable.

I know that we hear of persecution of Christians in places like North Korea or in the old Soviet Union when that was the issue, or even of Christians in Nazi Germany and stuff like Khorchin boom back then. I mean, we know in modern times Christians have been persecuted for righteousness sake, but not here. Not here.

This is where people flee to. People in America don't get persecuted. People persecuted everywhere else come here.

It never crosses our minds that we'd ever have occasion to want to flee from here to somewhere else because this has always been the refuge. America has always been a refuge in recent centuries for people who are persecuted. And it's just not, it's too far from our minds to think that we could be a center of persecution of Christianity at some point.

Now I used to say this kind of thing back in the 70s and 80s, but I was only guessing. I don't have to guess now. The snowball is already rolling down the hill.

We are facing persecution in this country, not like it could be, not like it might be in the future, but certainly we see it in cases that we would never have dreamed 20 years ago that could happen, that a person could be arrested for just doing what their Christian faith requires them to do rather than a crime. You know, I mean, we've heard many cases of that already in just the past decade or so. So we can see that things are moving rather quickly.

And we might say, well, but there must be something I can do to avoid persecution. Maybe, maybe you could apostatize, you know, go to hell instead, I suppose. But the only way that is following Jesus includes persecution.

It's inevitable. And Jesus said that in John chapter 15, he said, if they have persecuted me, they will persecute you. I mean, it's just like axiomatic.

In John 15 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. You're not greater than your master.

We sometimes live as though we are. Remember Jesus, you know, he was crowned with thorns and we plan to be crowned with roses. You know, we think we're supposed to live comfortable and Jesus had nowhere to lay his head.

You know, someone wanted to follow Jesus and he said, I'll follow you. And Jesus said, well, the foxes have holes and the birds have nests, but I don't even have a roof over my head. You want to be on this team? You want to be on this tour with me? You know, this tour of battle? When people say that Christians are king's kids and ought to be living like kings, they forget that the king is at war and we're in the trenches.

There's a palace to be had when the war is over, but don't get ahead of yourself. We, you know, we're in the trenches. We don't feel like we're in the trenches because frankly, we're comfortable.

I mean, obviously we're comfortable people. We live in a comfortable world. But we're among the very few, very tiny minority of Christians in the historical way of seeing things that have ever been.

In most countries, in most parts of the world, and in many countries today, Christians are not only poor, but they're in danger. They're insecure. I mean, their circumstances are insecure.

And we see that kind of creeping up here and we think, it can't, it can't happen here. I remember when I was reading Brother Andrew's book, God Smuggler, and he would smuggle Bibles into communist countries back in the 60s, I think the 50s and 60s, if I'm not mistaken, that he'd talk to the church leaders there and they'd say, you know, we just thought it couldn't happen here. We knew it happened in Russia.

We knew it happened in, you know, Poland. We knew it happened in Czechoslovakia. We just thought it wouldn't happen here.

And it did happen there. And it's, a lot of times we live in denial and Jesus gives us all the tools for avoiding denial. He affirms, you will be persecuted.

And to us, we think that means my neighbor may not like me because I have a Jesus sticker on my car, so he won't speak to me when I drive by, you know. Well, we've had that happen, but that's, it's not exactly, I mean, that's not unbearable persecution by any means. Last time, we actually talked a fair bit about martyrdom as the New Testament

talks about it.

If you love your life in this world, you'll lose it. If you lose your life, for my sake, Jesus said, you'll find it. We may not die as martyrs here, though, honestly, we can't be sure anymore in this country.

There are martyrs in other countries all the time. As we speak, there are people who are either being killed or are waiting to be killed in prisons as Christians, but that's such a foreign world to us. The only trouble is it's a world you can get around in 24 hours on an airplane.

It's not a big world anymore. It's not a different world. It's the same rock in space that we're living on and evil creeps.

But fortunately, the King of God creeps, too. The King of God expands, but it faces opposition, especially on the frontiers where it expands, where it's facing especially a demonic, satanic culture. Unfortunately, this country has become much more of that kind of a culture in the last 30 years than we would have ever imagined.

In fact, 40 years ago, 50 years ago, it seemed to me like the whole country was almost going to be converted because there's a great revival going on and everywhere you went, people my age were getting saved. I mean, it seemed like it was easier to get people saved than for them to not get saved in those days of revival. In times of revival, it really looks like, wow, the country's going to be redeemed.

God's saving everybody. But a lot of times, a lot of times he's done that just before bringing the boom down. There's a book about what happened in Cambodia, the killing fields, the Khmer Rouge, killing all those people.

Just a few years before that crisis happened, a couple of missionaries from Oral Roberts University, a man and wife, went over there, and there was a great revival. He actually, he just went there, not supported by any organization or anything like that. He just was doing street work.

Eventually, his work was so well received, he was able to get a Coliseum and have healing meetings. There's healings and there are miracles and there are demons being cast out of people and multitudes are being saved. It was a wonderful revival, a lot like the Jesus movement here.

But then came the Khmer Rouge and the place was bathed in blood. He wrote a book about his time there. He named the book, Anointed for Burial, which is a term that Jesus used when he said that Mary had anointed him with oil, had anointed him, she's anointing me for my burial, he said.

He was speaking about how Cambodia was anointed just before burial, anointed by the

Holy Spirit coming down in a revival. That happened in Jerusalem too, by the way. Pentecost was just 40 years before the absolute bloodbath of 70 AD, just within that generation.

It's not uncommon before a great crisis comes upon a nation that God actually does send a revival to harvest what he can before it goes down. I'm not trying to be ominous because I hope that's not true of our nation. But as I say, 40 years ago, it looked like people were being saved by the gazillions and almost like a whole generation.

The baby boomers, you'd think if this keeps going on, all the baby boomers will be saved. Then we'll have a whole generation running the country and they're saved. I didn't actually think clearly in those terms, I just had that general feeling, like God's kingdom has taken over here.

But now we see that the enemy has resurged. So we are really probably in a worse condition than many people who have suffered persecution because we've taken for granted so long that we don't deserve it. The whole pre-trib rapture doctrine often is taught like God would never allow his bride to go through something horrible like the tribulation.

So of course, he'll have to rapture us first. These people are only Americans who say this because you can't really say that anywhere else in the world. You can't look at what the church has faced everywhere else in the world and say God would never let his bride go through horrendous sufferings and stuff.

That's hardly been anything else than that in the past 2,000 years. We're living in this little bubble of unreality for the past 200, 300 years where we have the luxury of thinking, oh, God doesn't want us to suffer. He wants us to prosper.

He wants us to be happy. He wants us to be comfortable. Well, he apparently has wanted that for a while.

Our test has been with prosperity. People can be tested with trials. People can be tested with poverty.

They can be tested with persecution. Or they can be tested the other way. I think, unfortunately, the church in America did not do very well in passing the test of prosperity because we've become so comfortable that the enemy has just come right in and Christianity is seen as a worldly, materialistic, shallow, unspiritual reality.

There's other spiritualities, other religions from the east have come in that are filling the void of the loss of spirituality of the church in the west. This is how I perceive our recent history. In Mark chapter 4, there's the parable there of the sower and the seeds.

You also have the same parable in Matthew 13 and in Luke 8. But in Mark 4, you recall

the seeds were sown and they fell on four different kinds of ground. Mark 4.14. The sower sows the word. These are the ones by the wayside where the word was sown.

When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts. These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness and they have no root in themselves and they endure only for a time afterward when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake. Immediately they stumble.

Now, I think that this second kind of ground probably is very commonly seen in a society like ours where we're at peace, frankly, we're prosperous, we're comfortable, that we receive the seed with joy. But there's in many cases in the church in comfortable lands, there's a joyful reception of the word, but there's not much deep room. There's not much challenge of the foundations of our heart's core.

Am I about God or am I about me? I think that's really the issue here, that when the gospel is preached, it calls us, as teacher Bonhoeffer said, when God calls man, he calls him to come and die. We don't see it that way. We see it as God calls us to come and miss the tribulation.

God comes and helps us to miss out on hell. He comes out to make our life better, to save our marriage, to maybe help our kids stay off drugs or whatever. We see all the things that God can do for us in many cases.

And then we're surprised when things go badly too often. And we don't realize that's the norm. Going badly is the norm.

But the seed that didn't have any root in it when the sun came up and burned it, he said, that's those who in persecution and tribulation come, they fall away quickly. Now, I'm afraid in our country, that persecution and tribulation hasn't really come full strength yet, but we already see people fall away just from boredom. There's hardly any conflict, there's hardly any combat in the spiritual realm that we observe here like they do in other parts of the world.

The missionaries, they go out in the front lines, they see combat. They're casting demons out of people, they're seeing people saved, they're seeing people kill them or want to kill them. There's all kinds of excitements in the war there, but we're kind of living in a, not a very busy combat zone.

And therefore, I think a lot of people fall away just because they're bored, they're looking for something more interesting. Whereas when the persecution comes, it gets interesting, but you'll see more fall away then, because they'll just say, I didn't sign up for this, the preacher didn't tell me about this, he just said, well, every eye is closed and every head is bowed, lift one finger and I'll say a prayer for you and you'll go to heaven.

Well, that didn't cost me much, I didn't even have to let the guy sitting next to me know I was making a profession of faith, you know, what do I need, I didn't, I'd be embarrassed to have people know I'm a Christian, much less persecute me, how could I endure that? And I really think that persecution comes to test, but it's inevitable, Jesus said it's inevitable.

In Philippians chapter one, Paul talks about persecution as if it's not only inevitable, but it's kind of a privilege. In Philippians chapter one, in verse 29, for to you it has been granted, now granted is like, it's a privilege, you've been granted a privilege, you've been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake. Now I don't know how often we see it that way, when we suffer for his sake, wow, what a privilege, but think about it, it is a privilege, because it means that the people who hate Christ hate us too, for the same reason.

They must see us as being similar enough to Christ that they have as much hard time tolerating us as they have tolerating him. It's kind of a flattery really, to have the world hate you, if it hates Jesus. To my mind, it's always seemed like kind of an insult, if people hate Jesus, they say I think you're okay, you know, I like you just fine, you know, I don't like Jesus, but you're cool, you know, I mean, that's not what, that's not how it should be.

All they're saying is, you're not very much like Jesus, if you're like him, I'd hate you, but I don't, because you're not, and this is a, it's a privilege to be counted worthy to suffer for his name's sake. So we read in the Apostles in Acts 5 that when they went away from the council being beaten, they rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the name of Jesus. It's a different mentality than ours, certainly.

Now, the reason people persecute us, oh, it says in 2 Timothy 3, 12, I think this may be one of the best known verses about persecution, 2 Timothy 3, 12, Paul says, yes, and all who will live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. Now, I know most American Christians from here, they think, what's that say about me? You know, I don't really see myself suffering much persecution, am I not living godly in Christ Jesus? At least all who live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution, but we have to remember that it's not always equally intensive. We do, all of us have known some persecution.

All of us have felt some. It's just not very intense here. We've had family members or neighbors or people at work or people who know us, don't agree with our views, feel offended by them.

They might not hurt you, they might not even speak to you. That might be their way of persecuting you. It's just not even just steering a wide berth around you, it may be their way of persecuting you, and that doesn't feel too bad, unless you're specifically hoping to have a relationship with them that they're denying you of, but the point is that is persecution.

It's just that some persecution is not very painful. Yeah, I mean, there is a sense in which we could see almost all attacks of the enemy, whether they come through people or not, as a persecution the enemy is persecuting. The enemy was persecuting Job.

There weren't people persecuting Job because he was a good guy. The people who stole his stuff stole the stuff because he was a rich guy, not because he was a good guy. But we could say he was specifically being persecuted by Satan, because the devil, God said, have you noticed my servant Job, he's a good man, let me get at him, I'll show you he's not that good.

And so there's a sense in which all suffering that the devil brings upon us, including marriage failures and things like that. I mean, I honestly feel, I mean, I know of marriages where the marriage broke up because one party wanted to follow a godly way and the other person didn't want to, and they persecuted the godly. Now let's look down at these notes a little bit.

Let's look at Roman numeral three. I'm not covering everything in the notes, I never do. It says in 1 Peter chapter four, verses 12 through 14, Peter says, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trials that are to come upon you.

And he's referring to persecution in this particular letter. As if some strange thing happened to you, but rather rejoice that you're a sharer in the glory of God. When you suffer for Christ, there is a glory that comes to God in the situation, if you're suffering faithfully, obviously.

And the way he says it is, in 1 Peter four, verse 12, beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial, which is to try you as though some strange thing happened to you. This is normal. But rejoice to the extent that you partake in Christ's sufferings, and when his glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.

If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you. It's like he's kind of quoting the Beatitude. Blessed are you and reproach you for my namesake.

For the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part he's blasphemed, but on your part he's glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a busybody in other people's matters.

Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter. So there's no blessing if you're persecuted because you're a criminal or because you're bad, but if you're suffering for Christ's sake, glorify God in that because you're giving glory to God by bearing reproach. Remember when Jesus met with the two men on the road to Emmaus before they knew who he was and he was walking along with them and they told him, you know, we had thought this one was going to be the Messiah, that he died and some strange women's reports were that he rose, but you

know, who can believe them and so forth.

And Jesus said, oh, foolish and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have written. He said, should not the Messiah have suffered these things and entered into his glory? Suffering before glory is basically a theme in the New Testament. Christ suffered to enter his glory.

We suffer for his glory and for our own. It says actually in Romans 8, 18, this is not in your notes, but in Romans 8, 18, Paul says the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us. And over in 2 Corinthians 4, beginning at verse 16, Paul says, though our outer man is perishing, our inner man is renewed day by day while we do not look, or he said, for our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory while we do not look at the things that are seen, but the things that are not seen, for the things that are seen are temporal, things that are unseen are eternal.

But he says that our light affliction is working for us a glory in us. In the Romans passage I mentioned, 8, 18, he says, our sufferings in this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us. So we're going to be glorified.

And part of that glory is it comes the same way Jesus is glorified. You know, he was glorified through crucifixion, through death, through being rejected, through being hated. And we'd like to be glorified a little easier than that.

Or maybe we might say, hey, I'll just skip out on being glorified. I'm not that ambitious anyway. You know, just spare me the trouble, spare me the persecution.

I'll be glad not to have the glory. But God made us for his glory. If we don't have the glory, then we are not pleasing him.

Jesus said, let your light shine before men, that men may see your good works and glorify your father, which is in heaven, that God will be glorified in us is the purpose for existence. It's not ours to say, well, I'll just kind of, I don't need any glory. I'm not a glory hog.

I'll just be glad to, glad to be, you know, unknown, unseen. Well, yeah, for now that's fine. But God wants you to reign with him.

God wants you to be glorified with him. God wants you to share in his glory. You might say, well, I don't like, I don't need that.

Well, who cares what you need? You aren't made to have what you need. You're made to have what God needs, what God wants. What pleases God is what matters, not what pleases you.

So God has made us for his glory and that glory comes through being faithful through suffering. And that's what, that's what the New Testament teaches in so many places. So we're not supposed to think of it as a strange thing when we suffer it.

We say, well, what did I do, you know, what did I do to deserve this? I don't think it's strange. This is normal stuff. This is, it's strange to us because our accustomed life has been strange.

We have lived in a, in a country that's a lot more like Disneyland than like the real world. You know, it's more like the magic kingdom than like the kingdom that's at war. Yes.

Go ahead. Right. Yeah.

That reference in 1 Thessalonians 5, 9, God has not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation in the day of Jesus Christ. It's not talking about the tribulation, it's talking about the day of judgment, you know, on the day of judgment, we escape the wrath of God because we're his children, we're on his side because we, you know, because we, he saves us from the wrath to come. It says in 1 Thessalonians 1. So you know, we're not, we're not recipients of God's wrath, but we are the recipients of the devil's wrath.

You see, and that's what they get mixed up. They often say, well, the tribulation, that's God's wrath poured out on the earth. Well, there's, Revelation does describe God's wrath, but there's an awful lot of the Antichrist's wrath too.

I mean, the devil's wrath. Woe unto you inhabitants of the earth for the devil has come down to you having great wrath for he knows his time is short. I mean, you've got the wrath of God and you've got the wrath of the devil.

The rebellious receive the wrath of God. We don't, but we received the wrath of Satan and of his people. And that's never been otherwise.

I mean, it was never otherwise in the old Testament. It was never otherwise in the new. It's never otherwise in history and the history of the church except here, you know, so this is, what should we do about persecution? Let me just say, I have more things on the list perhaps than we can cover, but I do want to say this.

To flee from persecution is not viewed as cowardice. Jesus said in Matthew 10, when they persecute you in one city, flee to the next. That's when he sent out the 70, you know, to, I'm sorry, that was Luke, wasn't it? Oh no, that's Matthew.

So that's when he sent out the 12, when he said that. Matthew 10, 23, when they persecute you in one city, flee to the next. When Paul found out that the Jews had surrounded Damascus to capture him, he escaped out the window of a wall in a basket and fled.

When Peter was released from prison by an angel, because he was on death row to be killed by Herod the next day, he fled and went to some other place undisclosed. To flee from persecution, there's nothing wrong with that. Now, there were times in church history when Christians were so enamored with persecution that they didn't want to flee from persecution, they actually wanted to, the glory of dying for Christ.

Origen, one of the church fathers, his father died a martyr, and he was, I think, 16 himself. Origen, I think, was 16 or 14, a real young one, his father died. And he was so eager to go be a martyr, too, that his mother hid all of his clothes from him so he couldn't go outside, because he would have gone and turned himself in to become a martyr.

That's a famous story of Origen's life, that his mother had to hide his clothes so that he wouldn't go and volunteer to be a martyr. But there were a lot of people who were zealous to be martyrs. Polycarp, one of the most famous martyrs in the second century, whose story is given to us, preserved by the Church of Smyrna in great detail.

When he was sought, he knew they were seeking him, so he fled from his house to another place. But he had a dream that night in that other place of himself being consumed in flames on his bed, and he felt like that was God telling him that he was to die a martyr, be burned at the stake. And so, although the enemies found out where he was, and he knew they did, he had a chance to escape.

He didn't try to escape the second time. And when they came, he just said, would you give me an hour to pray before you take me? And so they did, and he prayed for them. The report says that the soldiers regretted having come for him because he prayed so fervently for them and stuff.

But anyway, he was burned at the stake. Actually, the fire wouldn't touch his body when he was alive. They had pierced him when he bled to death, and then they could burn his body.

But that's a very famous and well-attested story. Actually, the Church of Smyrna records it play-by-play in a document called the Martyr of Apollinaris. But the point is, I'm saying that sometimes the Christians didn't want to flee so much from martyrdom, but there's times he that flees, he will live to preach again or to take care of his children or something else that has to be done.

And so fleeing from that kind of trouble has been a very common thing throughout history. The Christians in Jerusalem fled from Jerusalem before the Romans arrived. The Huguenots, the French Protestant Huguenots, fled from Catholic persecution and across the, I guess it was the English Channel to get away from that.

The Moravians, who were kind of the founders of the modern mission movement, they

fled from persecution in their country of Moravia and fled to Germany and started a Christian community in Germany under Count von Zinzendorf, and they became great missionaries, the first Protestant missionaries to really go out and reach a lot of faraway lands. Mennonites and Amish had to flee from Europe because of persecution to America. So there's fleeing is not unheard of.

The Armenian Christians, this is an interesting story. You may know that the Turks came and slaughtered the Armenians earlier in the 20th century, but a few years before that, a boy who was, I think, 10 years old in the, Armenia was a Christian country and Eastern Orthodox, I think, a boy had a vision telling him that they, all the Christians should flee from Armenia to Los Angeles. He didn't know where Los Angeles was, but he saw it in a vision, on a map, and because there's going to be a great slaughter, and about half, from what I understand, about half the Armenian population fled to America, many of them are still in Los Angeles today.

The other half stayed behind and were slaughtered by the Turks, a horrible genocide. So I mean, there'd been lots of times when Christians fled, and like I said, no one ever thinks of fleeing from America. This is where people flee to, so far, but I think people used to flee to Rome to avoid persecution, too, and that turned around as well.

Anyway, fleeing is not wrong. It's not always, it's certainly never practical, but it sometimes is an option that people choose, but it's interesting when you feel like you can't flee, and you feel like you have to face the persecution, that the early church, they didn't necessarily pray to be spared the persecution, but they, let me show you what they did pray. In Acts chapter 4, this is a very interesting thing, and we don't have to look at much more beyond this because we're out of time.

In Acts 4, the apostles, at least Peter and John and maybe some others, were beaten by the Sanhedrin and released, and in verse 23, Acts 4, 23, it says, "...and being let go, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them." Basically, what they said is, we're going to kill you if you keep preaching, okay? So they're kind of in trouble. "...so when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said," and so they prayed, which is what Christians normally do when there's danger, but look what they prayed. "Lord, you are the God who made heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them, who by the mouth of your servant David have said, why did the nations rage and the people plot vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his Christ.

For truly against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed both Herod and Pontius Pilate with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever your hand and your purpose determined before to be done. Now Lord, look on their threats." Now, here's what you expect them to say, and protect us. They said, "Lord,

look on their threats and grant to your servants that with all boldness they may speak your word by stretching out your hand to heal and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus.' And when they prayed, the place shook where they were and they were all filled with the spirit and they spoke the word of God with boldness." Now, it's interesting, here they are, their lives are threatened.

You don't preach anymore in the name of Jesus, you're going to die. Well, we don't really have a choice about that. Jesus told us to preach and so we've got to do that.

So I guess that means we've got to die? Well, maybe so. So God, what are we going to pray for? Give us boldness. Don't let us be intimidated by these threats.

They didn't even pray for protection. They just said, "'God, you made the heavens and the earth. You're a big God.

You predicted there'd be this. You said through David that your son would be persecuted and we've lived to see it happen. So what do we say? Give us boldness not to back down.

Help us to be courageous." And so praying for courage. I mean, I don't think there's anything wrong with praying that God will someday bring an end to the persecution. We do see in Revelation chapter 6, when the fifth seal is opened, that he sees the souls of martyrs under the altar there in heaven and they say, "'How long, O Lord, before you avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' To pray for the end of the persecution, for the church's sake, for the kingdom of God's sake is legitimate.

But when it comes down to the apostles' attitude in this whole matter, they weren't afraid that God would keep them from being martyrs. They prayed that they wouldn't be intimidated by that threat. And that's apparently a very biblical way to respond.

Now, I would just point out to you, in this prayer they prayed, notice they never say we and us and me and I. What do they say? Look how many times they talk to God about himself. They speak about God. It's all a prayer that's God-oriented.

If you look at it in verse 24, it says, "'Lord, you are God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all the descendants, who by the mouth of your servant David have said, "'Why did the nations rage?' Et cetera." Verse 27, "'For truly against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate and the Gentiles did to do whatever your hand and your purpose determined to be done. Now, Lord, look on their threats and grant your servants that with all boldness they may speak your word by stretching out your hand to heal.'" Our prayers are all self-centered. You know, Lord, help me, help mine, help us.

And it's all about you, God, your hand, your servants. May your servant, Jesus, be glorified. May your word go out.

You're the one that we're here about. We're not here about us. This is such a God-centered prayer.

There's not a single us or we in it. The only time they speak of themselves, they do so in the terms, your servants, you know? Grant your servants boldness to speak. So I mean, the early church, it's not like persecution was some kind of a, well, crisis.

I mean, it was a crisis, obviously, but I guess crisis is what they expected. And they just said, hey, we're weak people. We're not bold, courageous people.

Give us boldness so that we can, we're facing threats here, but give us the boldness to not break down and cave in and back down. So in response to a time of persecution, there are Christian options. Flight has always been one that Christians have sometimes taken, which Jesus authorized in certain situations.

There's of course, prayer for God to end the persecution against the church, but also prayer that we'll have boldness to stand through it. Because sometimes, although God ultimately will put down all persecution, eventually there'll be none. But in the meantime, some people have to stand through it.

I mean, think of the Christians in the Soviet Union, 70 years they were under communism before the wall fell. So I mean, and they're still in miserable condition, poverty and so forth. But I mean, think of the persecution they went through.

It was a 70 year period. That's a whole lifetime of, it's a major part of two generations. The early church, before Constantine became a Christian and ended the persecution, they had two full centuries of persecution with brief reprieves here and there.

I mean, that was the norm for five generations running. You know, I mean, this is so foreign to us. But then in many respects, I think biblical Christianity is relatively foreign to our society because we've kind of, we've come up with a message that's all about, you can have all this in heaven too, you know.

And it's not usually that way. It's been that way for us for our lifetimes up till now, but maybe not for the rest of our lives, so we don't know. We can pray, obviously pray for the kingdom to come, for his will to be done on earth.

Maybe all that will happen before persecution comes. But we are not the best Christians who've ever lived or the ones most worthy of exemption of suffering. You know, there's a good chance that we are probably less worthy of that exemption than many who've suffered throughout history.

So it's a sobering thing, but it means that you've got to take Jesus seriously or not at all. And that's what persecution does. It kind of weeds out the ones who are not really taking him seriously at all.

They've got no root. The persecution and tribulation, they wither. They're gone, they fall away.

But those who remain shine like the stars in the firmament, says in Daniel. In those days, many shall be slaughtered and made white, but those who know their God shall do exploits, it says. So I guess the question is, do you want to be a Christian hero or I guess a Christian zero, you know? Because in times of persecution, those are the two choices.

Times like now, you can kind of be an in-between, kind of a something. But in times of persecution, you're either a hero or a zero as a Christian, it seems like.