

The Sermon on the Mount. Blessed are those who are persecuted
because of righteousness.
(Matthew 5 v 10 Hebrews 11 & 12)

The Lord Jesus has turned human, worldly wisdom on its head with these opening statements in His famous Sermon on the Mount. Much of this is the opposite of how people usually think.

We are rich in heavenly blessing, He says, when we realise the whole world is worth nothing should we forfeit our soul. Yet, having Christ as Saviour, Lord and Friend we begin to appreciate what is real treasure.

The way to the deepest happiness, He says, is actually through the honest sorrow of facing reality, our own sin and that of others which prompts us to turn back to God for forgiveness and loving comfort.

The world says, Don't show weakness or people will walk all over you. He says – God blesses those who choose to let others go first – the meek are promised an eternal inheritance in resurrection Earth!

The world urges us to run after material things and popularity. He says, make your first priority and the primary hunger of your heart the things of God and you'll discover the delight of true satisfaction.

Show mercy cheerfully, He says, and God will show you the same. Pray for an undivided heart to love and serve the Lord and you will be privileged to see and know God. This world's bullies may sneer at those who strive for peace but God smiles on them as His children.

With this last one some may think Jesus has finally 'lost the plot'. He says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven". And He elaborates, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil about you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because

great is your reward in Heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you”.

What kind of crazy masochism is this? Are we supposed to go looking for trouble so we can be happy in suffering when people are treating us cruelly?

Is it not more the way of the world to write stories and make movies where the bad guys finally get a good thrashing? Don't we just love it when Sylvester Stallone or Bruce Willis finally get the villain in their sights and give them what they clearly deserve?

The Bible does not teach that there shouldn't be justice. It encourages proper, ordered, legal administration to protect citizens and punish wrongdoers. The NT teaches that Jesus Himself will return in glory one day soon to judge the living and the dead. No one will escape His impartial assessment.

What He is teaching here to those who have expressed an interest in being His followers is two important things.

1. Christians should expect some opposition. We don't go out of our way to offend but many people in fact hate and resent Jesus and His absolute truth therefore they will resent and oppose those who seek to follow Him closely.

2. Nevertheless Christians can experience God's kindness and blessing even through times of intense suffering, a peace and comfort and even *joy* unknown to our persecutors. We are joining a long, noble succession of God's servants including our Lord Jesus Himself Who have endured suffering for truth and right and the Gospel cause. We are promised rest and reward in Heaven soon. And even now through the suffering and the tears we can experience God's closeness and provision like never before and in a bizarre way we find ourselves glad. What an honour, to suffer like our Master, to be obviously identifiable as His, even to be despised and rejected by ignorant

people – God our Father is smiling on us and doubtless working through it all for good.

The writer to Hebrews in the New Testament gives a long list of people of faith, people who had put their trust in God in the past, some of whom had been persecuted. While some at times had experienced God's miraculous saving power, like the Israelites at the Red Sea, or Daniel in the lion's den, some had also experienced prison, torture even execution.

The writer urges us not to lose heart or faith but to fix our eyes on Jesus Who endured the cross and 'opposition from sinful men' but has risen from the dead and reigns with God in glory. That is the destiny of every Christian but we have to stay faithful in the present short term even if at times it's difficult and painful.

Like the heroes of faith from long ago we must remember that we look forward to the 'Promised Land' of Heaven, a better life beyond this one, where we will dwell with Christ and all His people in peace and harmony.

And then we are given this challenging thought: God may at times be using even difficult circumstances to make us better Christians! We should not lose heart when God seems to be rebuking us for 'the Lord disciplines those He loves' and appears to 'punish' those He actually accepts as His children!

So our faith must learn patience, trusting God, our loving Father to use any and every means to correct, humble, refine and make us better Christians, knowing His desire is ultimately to bless us further and prepare us to enjoy His uninterrupted love forever.

Barnabas Fund, a Christian charity which helps persecuted believers worldwide, campaigns for justice and gives practical support to those who are suffering. It also records the amazing faith and gratitude frequently expressed by believers facing brutal treatment. Their trust in God is undiminished. Their love for Jesus is deeper than ever.

May we, along with them learn to say like the Apostle Paul,

“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” (2Corinthians 4 v 8 and 9)

Amen