

Jesus' Mission Brings Persecution

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[0 : 0 0] And then the words of the Lord Jesus, the words of the living God. Please keep that page open as we hear the words of Jesus together, and let's pray for his help as we do so.

Lord, we thank you that you teach us how to follow after you. Lord, we confess that we don't know the way in ourselves, and so often we get it wrong. Lord, we thank you that you are the way and the truth and the life. And so, Lord, as we have your words open before us now, we pray that you would give us hearts to hear and receive them, and that you would, by your Spirit, Lord, change our will, that we would live for you day by day. Lord, whatever it brings, for we ask in your precious name. Amen.

Amen. I wonder, what would stop you from speaking for Jesus? Or what does stop you from speaking for Jesus?

Last Sunday night, we finished by thinking about our baggage that gets in the way of us being sent by Jesus to lost people with the gospel. I wonder what it was you prayed for the Lord to free you from as we finished last Sunday. Jesus spoke to us about our fear of being in need.

He spoke to us about our fear of failure, and he spoke to us about our fear of people's rejection. Now, I don't know what it was he prayed for last Sunday, but Jesus seems to think that that last one, fear of people's rejection, is worth spending more time on. Jesus promises in our passage tonight that we don't need to worry about not being welcome, but he also promises that we won't be welcome.

[2 : 0 5] He says openly that his mission brings persecution. Look at how he sums up what he's doing in verse 16. I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. He's looking out over this field of harassed and helpless sheep. The wolves are running loose, and he is sending sheep back into that dangerous field to tell other sheep that the shepherd is here now. So flock to him, come under his protection, and be saved. And Jesus doesn't pretend to the sheep that he sends that that is a safe mission.

I read a book quite a few summers ago now called H. H. H. H. H. It's a weird title. Apparently, in the Second World War in Nazi Germany, it was a witty thing to say, Himmler's brain is called Heydrich. It's not so witty now, is it? They were both kind of high command in the Nazi kind of order, basically saying, you know, Himmler's in charge, but Heydrich's really pulling the strings. In German, all those words begin with H, hence the title. And the plot of the book is essentially about Operation Anthropoid, a true story about two spies from Czechoslovakia who were sent from London to Prague to assassinate Heydrich. They were parachuted into the countryside.

They had to make their way through occupied territory into the city where they were then hidden. And then, on the 27th of May 1942, when Heydrich was leaving a ceremony, their job was to jump into the road in front of his car with machine guns. I won't spoil the ending, but needless to say, their mission was one of unimaginable danger. Almost from the minute they signed up, their lives were on the line. But what would have stopped them from carrying out that mission? They were sent out as sheep among wolves, and they were under no illusion about that. But brothers and sisters, we often are.

Jesus has given us a mission, but are you prepared tonight to be hated? Verse 22. Are you prepared to be arrested? Verse 19. Are you ready to be betrayed to death? Verse 21.

Does the thought of any of those things stop you from carrying out Jesus' mission? We go through life, don't we, as if the Lord's work was safe. We forget that if we belong to the Lord, we are foreign agents in occupied territory, and our mission is to proclaim that there is another King, Jesus Christ. So tonight, Jesus prepares us for that reality, first by telling us about it, and then by teaching us how to respond. Two points then. Firstly, he tells us, you will be persecuted.

[5 : 25] Now, there's persecution for being a Christian in general. We saw something of that in our time in 1 Thessalonians at the start of the year. Simply calling yourself a Christian, people can treat you differently for that. But Jesus is speaking here about persecution that comes when we start to actively reach out to people. I am sending you out, he says. Now, we know people, don't we, who say things like this, as long as being a Christian makes you happy, great, good for you, but don't try and push it on me. Have you heard someone say that, something like that?

And yet, says Jesus, I am sending you out. So, friends, if we belong to him, we are not free then to say, oh, okay, oh, thanks for letting me know. I won't speak to you anymore about my faith.

Thanks for that. I understand. It's hard to know what to say, isn't it? It sounds like such a reasonable request. But think about it. Is it really so reasonable for someone to ask you not to bring the most important thing in your life into a relationship? You really, they're saying, stop being who you are for me. And in a culture that says, you do you, let's be clear, that it is only ever Christians who hear the opposite. Perhaps it's worth us pointing that out when that happens.

It's not consistent, is it? And yet, we shouldn't be surprised because the gospel is unique. It does set us apart in the world. Jesus is so clear about that. Don't bring your faith into our workplace, our school, our streets, our friendship. So, when we cross that line, what do we expect to happen?

Well, what happens when sheep talk back to wolves? Jesus doesn't talk in might's and if's. He says to the 12 in verse 17, you will be handed over to local councils and flogged in the synagogues.

[7 : 37] Verse 18, you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, verse 19, do not worry about what to say. These things are not possibilities, are they? They are certainties. You only have to read the book of Acts to see all of these things. They are in and out of prison like jack-in-the-boxes. Why? Because when they were told in Acts 4 not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus, they replied, which is right in God's eyes to listen to you. They are not. They are not. They are not. They are not. They cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard. They suffered in that way because they were sheep on the shepherd's mission, talking back to wolves.

Verses 19 and 20 are ones that Christians often quote. Sometimes, frankly, out of laziness, as an excuse not to be prepared to speak. You know, I'll just trust God to give me the words.

There is that reassurance, but notice that it is in the context of when you've been taken to court. Right? That's not an everyday conversation over the garden fence, is it? So I think the point of those words is actually deeper than we often think. Jesus is saying, if they take you to court, it's not really you standing trial. It's the one who sent you. So that when you come to answer the charges and put up a defense, he will answer the charges. It will not be you speaking, but the spirit of your father speaking through you. So brothers and sisters, what a comfort. And though on your day in court, if it comes, not only will God give you what to say, he is really the defendant that you are simply there to represent. And that day might come for you personally.

It's growing increasingly likely, I think. It's certainly come for Christians since the days of the apostles, as has verse 21. Now that verse makes me think of totalitarian regimes where people are conditioned by fear to even inform on their own families. That happens today in places like North Korea, Afghanistan, other states that are not just non-Christian, but are anti-Christian, where people have to hide their Bibles in their own home for fear that a parent, a brother, a child will find it and report them to the police. That happens. But verse 22 is probably closer to what many of us might face today. You will be hated by everyone because of me. Now, if you're considering Christianity or you're a new Christian, you need to hear from Jesus that to belong to him is a kind of social suicide.

We want to do, don't we, as much as we can to be at peace with everyone. That's right. But Jesus says everyone will not be at peace with us. And there's nothing we can do to change that short of giving up Christ. But the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. Now, becoming a dad has made me think about that more seriously in the last couple of years. There'd be something deeply wrong, wouldn't there, if a parent didn't have the instinct to protect their children from danger? I want to do everything every day that I can to stop harm coming to my kids. But that is not fully consistent with raising them to be Christians. Because if they do live as Christians in the world, Christ is clear that they will be hated. Something that helped me with that was actually an illustration that was shared at Keswick the other week. One of the preachers told a story about a family in Cambodia in the time of the Khmer Rouge.

[12 : 11] That was a group that killed about two million people in the 70s, including many Christians. He said there was a Christian family who were discovered and forced to dig their own grave in a field before kneeling down next to it to be shot. And as they knelt down, one of the children in fear and panic got up and ran into the bushes. Now, as a dad, there is a big part of me that would want my child to run and live. But the dad called out something like this, don't run, come back.

What is better to spend a few days on your own being hunted like an animal or to come back to your family and die for the name of Christ and come with us to be with the Lord?

I'm sure a good part of him wanted his child to run, to live, but he called his child back to stand firm for Christ. And the child came back and knelt by the grave and they were executed.

What do we want most for our kids? Most. Not a safe, happy, carefree life, though I do want that for them. Most of all, I want them to stick with Jesus till they die.

That story helped me to see that I want them to do that even if they have to die for sticking with him. Jesus' mission turns what we want in life upside down, doesn't it? Our instinct to protect ourselves, to protect our families, protect our friends. It's good and right.

[13 : 55] But the best way to do that forever is to prepare ourselves to suffer harm and hatred for his name, even to die for him, because the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.

Now, we can try and find another way. Perhaps if we all went to America, like the pilgrims on the Mayflower fleeing persecution in 1620 in England, we'll be safe. But Jesus says God's people won't find a permanent home until he comes again. Flee from town to town, he says. You won't find somewhere to settle for good until the Son of Man comes. So, brothers and sisters, there is nothing for it.

There's nothing for it. Jesus' mission brings persecution. So, if your mission in life is to try your best to avoid being set back or hurt or misunderstood because of Jesus and the gospel, you have to ask, whose mission am I really on?

Whose mission am I really on? If we're not shrewdly but innocently crossing lines in our culture and saying what shouldn't be said, we're not going to get hurt, but then we're clearly not living the life that Jesus plainly expects us to live if we are his. You know, after all, who are we to say, I belong to Jesus, but his suffering doesn't belong to me?

What does Jesus say? The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. In John's gospel, we just heard Jesus say, if they persecuted me, they will persecute you.

[15 : 40] Well, we say, who has the right to demand that I be hated and suffer for him? But here's the shock. Jesus does demand that.

It's one of those shocking statements, isn't it, in verse 22. You will be hated, he says, because of me. Because of me. Jesus even said back in chapter 5, verse 11, Hear this, blessed are you, he said, blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Because of me. Friends, he can say that because he's the Lord Jesus. And he can say it because he was hated and suffered and died for us first.

If our teacher and master had given in because he was hated, we would not be saved. So then what should we, his students and servants, therefore do?

I hope you've been praying that prayer this week. Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest fields. What kind of response should we expect when Jesus sends us out?

[17 : 03] He says we should expect persecution. So given that, how does he teach us to handle it? Secondly then, he says, fear him, not them.

Verse 26 is one of those trademark Jesus left hooks that we didn't see coming, isn't it? In our translation, it begins with the word, so. In the original, it's even more forceful.

Therefore, do not be afraid of them. Now when someone says therefore, what comes next is meant to be the logical conclusion of what they've just said.

Right, you might have said this week, it's very hot today, therefore put on your hat and sun cream. Jesus says, if they called me the devil, they're going to call you the devil.

Therefore, do not be afraid of them. Sounds like I should be afraid of them, doesn't it? Now, how do we handle that?

[18 : 02] With the benefit of hindsight, we can say, well, they can't do worse to us than they did to him. They nailed him to the cross, but how did that go? On the third day, he rose again from the dead.

So if they're going to treat us the way they treated Jesus, well, actually, that worked out okay. In fact, a lot better than okay. So let's not be afraid, then, of being treated like Jesus, because, you know, there's a resurrection on the other side of suffering and death, which far outweighs anything that anyone can do to us now.

Now that makes sense, doesn't it? And it does help us not to be afraid. The only problem with that in the text is, of course, Jesus hasn't yet died and risen again.

The 12 don't know yet that the cross isn't the last word. So what is he getting at? Well, where our translation says afraid, a better translation might be fear.

What's the difference, you say? Well, just look at verse 28. It's Jesus says there, do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul, okay?

[19 : 13] Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Now, is Jesus teaching the 12 to be afraid of God in the same way that they might be afraid of persecution, right?

He can't be saying, I think, if persecution terrifies you, God should terrify you even more. That's not how Jesus teaches us, is it? To relate to our Father in heaven, fear and terror.

Now swap in the word fear. Here's the ESV. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

To fear someone is different from being afraid of them, isn't it? In the Bible, fearing someone is to acknowledge them, to be the one who has supreme power and control.

This person is in charge. So when I'm making decisions, I care what they think about it and less so what other people think about it. I fear that person.

[20 : 25] So here's Jesus' question, I think. Who do you care most, what they think of you? That's who you fear. Is there anyone in your life right now who you would not speak to about Jesus if you had the opportunity because you place so much value on their opinion of you or so much weight on what they think?

We're always making micro-assessments, aren't we, of people, what they think. Even as I got ready to preach this week, I had little conversations running through my head thinking, what would people think about what I was planning to say?

That can be helpful. That's what I think it means to be shrewd, to be switched on. That's how we go to work, isn't it? That's how we get ready for meetings, that we are aware of what other people are thinking.

But we also have to be innocent, uncompromised. If what people think or what we think they think stops us from speaking for the Lord Jesus, our fear is out of balance.

Jesus is saying, don't let what people think of you weigh heaviest on your mind. Let what God thinks of you weigh heaviest on you. In that split second, you have to decide whether to take the opportunity to introduce Jesus into a conversation.

[21 : 52] Don't worry about what that person's going to say back. Don't worry about what they're going to think. Worry about what God is going to think. He should be bigger, shouldn't he, in our field of vision, not people.

Fear him, not them. So brothers and sisters, when you open your mouth to tell someone you're a Christian, to talk about Jesus, you might be terrified. You might barely be able to get the words out.

Your hands might be sweaty. But who is bigger to you in that moment? People can call you names. They can hit you. They can put you in prison. God can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Who is bigger? Who does it matter more to you what they think of you? Who should it? Let me be really clear.

Jesus isn't threatening that punishment if we get it wrong. There'll be plenty of times on Jesus' mission that a conversation comes to an end and we cringe and hold our head in our hands and say, Lord, I'm sorry, I've bottled it.

[23 : 02] Or, Lord, I'm sorry, I'm not sure that was really clear what I said. Or, I'm not sure that was the most helpful thing. Listen, God is not going to send us to hell for that. He's speaking here about the same father, isn't he, who in verse 30 knows if a single hair falls out of your head, we've got brushes full of old hairs at home.

God could tell us when each one came out and which follicle on each person's head it came out of. That is his level of care for you if you were his.

In this context, it's even more precious, isn't it, to us? If God cares about each of us enough to number our hairs, what can people do to you that he doesn't care about? He's the father who, in verse 31, Jesus says, remember those sparrows in the market?

Yeah, two for a penny, they're just giving them away, yet not one of them falls to the ground apart from your father's care. Well, you are worth more than many sparrows.

If God gives personal care and attention to sparrows, how much more care and attention does he personally give to each one of us?

[24 : 18] So, Jesus is not saying, is he, relate to God as the most terrifying thing in your life. He can't be saying that. He isn't saying, try and share the gospel and get it wrong and God might just destroy your body and soul.

He's actually saying, isn't he, try and share the gospel and whatever happens next, whatever happens, you have a father in heaven who will protect and care for you down to the individual hairs on your head.

Maybe you haven't thought of it exactly in those words, but we do sort of function like that, don't we, as if a good reason not to try and share my faith is the risk that I get it wrong or I don't know what to say or I'm not sure if somebody asked me that.

Your father in heaven is not like a school teacher marking you down. Didn't quite get that spot on. Could have done better there.

Brothers and sisters, in that moment, in that moment, he is hovering over you like a bird hovers over her chicks. He is shielding and guarding you under his almighty wings.

[25 : 38] It's worth saying, though, isn't it, that if we don't try, if we don't try, what does Jesus say in verse 32? Whoever acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my father in heaven.

If you want Jesus to call you his own on the last day, you have to publicly call him yours today.

It's Jesus' words, not mine. You don't have to be Rico Tice or J. John, a global evangelist speaking to millions, but you do have to let people know who you belong to.

Acknowledge him before others. And if we pretend we don't know him, what does he say in verse 33? But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my father in heaven.

If you are ashamed to let people know that you belong to him, Jesus will be ashamed to call you his.

[26 : 49] Difficult words, solemn words, but all to say that the only way to fail is never to try.

Disown him, don't acknowledge him, don't call yourself his, don't call him yours, be prepared for him to treat you in exactly that way before God on the last day.

I've been caused to think recently that I wouldn't like to go to prison for seven years and pay an unlimited fine. But what Jesus says here makes me think that I would prefer that than to disown him.

Keep him in the foreground of your thinking, fear him, and you might still be afraid, but you will find the words and the guts to speak when the opportunity comes.

Here's those verses from Psalm 118 quoted in Hebrews. He has said, I will never leave or forsake you, so we can confidently say the Lord is my helper. I will not fear.

[28 : 00] What can man do to me? So where do we go from here? Last week, I gave you a challenge. Pray every day for the Lord to send out workers into his harvest field and see what happens.

This week, I want you to keep praying that prayer, just because we've moved on in Jesus' sermon doesn't mean he didn't say it. This week, in addition to that, your challenge is to think of one person in your life who you're in regular or semi-regular contact with who isn't a Christian and either doesn't know that you're a Christian or you know would have a problem with you bringing it up.

Your challenge is to pray every day that the Lord would cause you to fear him more than them and then to just look for an opportunity.

Look for an opportunity to bring up your faith in conversation. I'm not saying force it. I'm saying pray about it and look for an opportunity. There might be more than one person you want to pray for.

That's fine. There might be other people who are more open. That's okay. Go for it. Rico Tice who's the guy in the Christianity Explored videos talks about crossing the pain line with people.

[29 : 21] Having that first conversation that's a little bit like tearing the plaster off. But we need to do that to get the air in don't we? Let's pray for ourselves and each other this week then that the Lord would help us to cross the pain line with just one person in our lives.

And like last week just see what happens. Just see how he answers that prayer. Jesus' mission friends does bring persecution but if we fear him more than people no one and nothing can stop us going out with the message of Jesus to lost people.

So as we did last time let's just take a minute to collect our thoughts to think of that person perhaps you'd like to pray for and then I'll lead us in prayer.

Let's pray together. Christ to Our Father, we thank you so much that you are the God of truth.

Lord, we thank you that what we've read tonight, we can actually see in our world and in our experience. Lord, we know that you are God and there is no other. And we confess, our Father, that our fear is so often out of order.

[31 : 12] Lord, we confess the times where we have feared others above you. But Lord, we want that to be different. We want to serve you freely, to be free of that fear.

And so we pray, Lord, by your spirit, would you liberate us tonight of the fear of man? Our Father, we look around the world and we see the witness and example of countless brothers and sisters who suffer physically and socially and in their families for your name.

Lord, we pray that you would hold that example up to us and help us, Lord, to be willing to do the same for Jesus' sake. Lord, we do commit to you, our friends, our neighbors, people we love, people in our families that are wax, Lord, people that have come across our paths in your providence.

Lord, we long for them to know you. Lord, help us to want that. And help us to want that, we pray, more than we fear what they'll say when we tell them that. But Lord, help us.

Be our help, we pray. Send us out, Lord, as sheep among wolves. Be our protector and our guardian. For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.