Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:10

Lloyd Jones:

THE CHRISTIAN AND PERSECUTION

WE come in verse 10 to the last of the Beatitudes, ‘Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.’ It is generally agreed that verses 11 and 12 are a kind of elaboration of this Beatitude, and perhaps an application of its truth and message to the disciples in particular.

1. The Christian is persecuted because he is a certain type of person and because he behaves in a certain manner. Whereas all the other beatitudes have been a direct description, this one is indirect. This is what is going to happen to you because you are a Christian, says Christ.

2. Another preliminary point of interest is that the promise attached to this Beatitude is the same as the promise attached to the first, ‘theirs is the kingdom of heaven’. Our Lord started and ended with this particular promise in order to impress upon His listeners that the important thing was membership of the kingdom of heaven.

3. All these Beatitudes have been searching, but there are ways in which this is even more searching than the others. There is more persecution of Christians today, some would say, than there has been since the first centuries of the Christian era.

Let us start with a few negatives. It does not say, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because they are objectionable.” It does not say, “Blessed are those who are having a hard time in their Christian life because they are being difficult.” It does not say, “Blessed are those who are being persecuted as Christians because they are seriously lacking in wisdom and are really foolish and unwise in what they regard as being their testimony.” It is not that. There is no need for one to elaborate this, but so often one has known Christian people who are suffering mild persecution entirely because of their own folly, because of something either in themselves or in what they are doing. But the promise does not apply to such people. It is for righteousness’ sake. Let us be very clear about that. We can bring endless suffering upon ourselves, we can create difficulties for ourselves which are quite unnecessary, because we have some rather foolish notion of witnessing and testifying, or because, in a spirit of self-righteousness, we really do call it down on our own heads. So let me put another negative. We are not told, “Blessed are the persecuted because they are fanatical.” Neither does it say, “Blessed are the persecuted because they are over-zealous.” Fanaticism can lead to persecution; but fanaticism is never commended in the New Testament.

Let me now add another negative from a different category. This text surely does not even mean “blessed are they that are persecuted for a cause”. This is a little subtle and we must be careful. I say that there is a difference between being persecuted for righteousness’ sake and being persecuted for a cause. I know that the two things often become one, and many of the great martyrs and confessors were at one and the same time suffering for righteousness’ sake and for a cause. But it does not follow by any means that the two are always identical. If you and I begin to mix our religion and politics, then we must not be surprised if we receive persecution. But I suggest that it will not of necessity be persecution for righteousness’ sake. Let me illustrate this; the Christian faith as such is not anti-communism.
Let us look at one final negative; this Beatitude does not even say, Blessed are they that are persecuted for being good, or noble, or self-sacrificing. The world, as a matter of fact, generally praises and admires and loves the good and the noble; it only persecutes the righteous.

What, then, does this Beatitude mean? Let me put it like this. Being righteous, practicing righteousness, really means being like the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore they are blessed who are persecuted for being like Him. What is more, those who are like Him always will be persecuted.

1. Listen to the way in which our Lord Himself puts it. ‘If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love its own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you’ (John 15:18–20). Now there is no qualification, it is a categorical statement.

2. Listen to His servant Paul putting it in this way, ‘Yea’, says Paul, writing to Timothy, who did not understand this teaching and was therefore unhappy because he was being persecuted, ‘Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution’ (2 Tim. 3:12). It is again a categorical statement. That is why I said at the beginning that

3. For instance, Abel was persecuted by his brother Cain. Moses received grievous persecution. Look at the way in which David was persecuted by Saul, and at the terrible persecution that Elijah and Jeremiah had to endure. Do you remember the story of Daniel, and how he was persecuted? These are some of the most outstanding righteous men of the Old Testament, and every one of them verifies the biblical teaching. They were persecuted, not because they were difficult, or over-zealous, but simply because they were righteous. In the New Testament we find exactly the same thing. Think of the apostles, and the persecution they had to endure. I wonder whether any man has ever suffered more than the apostle Paul, in spite of his gentleness and kindness and righteousness. Read his occasional descriptions of the sufferings that he had to endure. But, of course, the supreme example is our Lord Himself. Here He is in all His utter, absolute perfection, and His gentleness and meekness, of whom it can be said that ‘a bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench’. Never was anyone so gentle and so kind. But look at what happened to Him and at what the world did to Him. Read also the long history of the Christian Church and you will find that this statement has been verified endlessly. Read the lives of the martyrs, of John Huss, or the Covenanters, or the Protestant Fathers. Read about it also in more modern times and observe the persecution endured by the leaders of the Evangelical Awakening in the eighteenth century. Not many men have known what it is to suffer as did Hudson Taylor, who lived into the 20th century. He knew what it was to undergo at times grievous persecution.

4. By whom are the righteous persecuted? You will find as you go through the Scriptures, and as you study the history of the Church, that the persecution is not confined to the world. Some of the most grievous persecution has been suffered by the righteous at the hands of the nominal Church herself, and at the hands of religious people. It has often come from nominal Christians. Take our Lord Himself. Who were His chief persecutors? The Pharisees and scribes and the doctors of the Law! The first Christians, too, were persecuted most bitterly of all by the Jews. Then read the history of the Church, and watch it in the Roman Catholic persecution of some of those men in the Middle Ages.
who had seen the pure truth and were trying to live it out quietly. How they were persecuted by nominal, religious people! That was also the story of the Puritan Fathers. This is the teaching of the Bible, and it has been substantiated by the history of the Church, that the persecution may come, not from the outside but from within. Formal Christianity is often the greatest enemy of the pure faith.

But let me ask another question. Why are the righteous thus persecuted? And, especially, why is it that the righteous are persecuted rather than the good and noble? The answer, I think, is quite simple. The good and noble are very rarely persecuted because we all have the feeling that they are just like ourselves at our best. We think, “I am capable of that myself if I only put my mind to it,” and we admire them because it is a way of paying a compliment to ourselves. But the righteous are persecuted because they are different. That was why the Pharisees and the scribes hated our Lord. It was not because He was good; it was because He was different. They felt all their righteousness was being made to look very tawdry. That was what they disliked. The righteous may not say anything; they do not condemn others in words. But just because they are what they are, they do in fact condemn others, and they make them feel unhappy and shrivel into nothing. So they hate them for it and try to find fault with them.

Obviously, then, we can draw certain conclusions from all this.

1. For one thing, it tells us a great deal about our ideas concerning the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. If our conception of Him is such that He can be admired and applauded by the non-Christian, we have a wrong view of Him. The effect of Jesus Christ upon His contemporaries was that many threw stones at Him. They hated Him; and finally, choosing a murderer instead of Him, they put Him to death. This is the effect Jesus Christ always has upon the world. But you see there are other ideas about Him. There are worldly people who tell us they admire Jesus Christ, but that is because they have never seen Him. If they saw Him, they would hate Him as His contemporaries did. Man does not change. So let us be careful that our ideas about Christ are such that the natural man cannot easily admire or applaud.

2. That leads to the second conclusion. This Beatitude tests our ideas as to what the Christian is. The Christian is like his Lord, and this is what our Lord said about him. ‘Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets’ (Lk. 6:26). So I draw my next deduction. It concerns the natural, unregenerate man, and it is this. The natural mind, as Paul says, ‘enmity against God’. Though he talks about God, he really hates God. And when the Son of God came on earth he hated and crucified Him. And that is the attitude of the world towards Him now.

3. This leads to the last deduction, which is that the new birth is an absolute necessity before anybody can become a Christian. To be Christian, ultimately, is to be like Christ; and one can never be like Christ without being entirely changed. We must get rid of the old nature that hates Christ and hates righteousness; we need a new nature that will love these things and love Him and thus become like Him. If you become Christlike the world will hate you.

4. Finally, let us ask ourselves this question: Do we know what it is to be persecuted for righteousness’ sake? To become like Him we have to become light; light always exposes darkness, and the darkness therefore always hates the light. We are not to be offensive; we are not to be foolish; we are not to be unwise; we are not even to parade the Christian
faith. We are not to do anything that calls for persecution. But by just being like Christ persecution becomes inevitable. But that is the glorious thing. Rejoice in this, say Peter and James. And our Lord Him-self says, ‘Blessed are ye, happy are ye, if you are like that.’ Because if ever you find yourself persecuted for Christ and for righteousness’ sake, you have in a sense got the final proof of the fact that you are a Christian, that you are a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. Paul says to the Philippians, ‘unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake’ (Phil. 1:29).

May God through His Holy Spirit give us great wisdom, discrimination, knowledge and understanding in these things, so that if ever we are called upon to suffer, we may know for certain that it is for righteousness’ sake, and may have the full comfort and consolation of this glorious Beatitude.

Pink:

"Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness" sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (v. 10). The Christian life is one that is full of strange paradoxes which are quite insoluble to human reason, but which are easily understood by the spiritual mind. God’s saints rejoice with joy unspeakable, yet do they mourn with a lamentation to which the worldling is an utter stranger. The believer in Christ has been brought into contact with a source of vital satisfaction which is capable of meeting every longing, yet does he pant with a yearning like unto that of the thirsty hart. He sings and makes melody in his heart to the Lord, yet does he groan deeply and daily. His experience is often painful and perplexing, yet would he not part with it for all the gold in the world. These puzzling paradoxes are among the evidences which he possesses that he is indeed blessed of God. But who by mere reasoning would ever conclude that the persecuted and reviled are "blessed"! "It is a strong proof of human depravity that men’s curses and Christ’s blessings should meet on the same persons. Who would have thought that a man could be persecuted and reviled, and have all manner of evil said of him for righteousness’ sake? And do wicked men really hate justice and love those who defraud and wrong their neighbors? No; they do not dislike righteousness as it respects themselves: it is only that species of it which respects God and religion that excites their hatred. If Christians were content with doing justly and loving mercy, and would cease walking humbly with God, they might go through the world, not only in peace, but with applause; but he that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution (2 Tim. 3:12). Such a life reproves the ungodliness of men and provokes their resentment" (Andrew Fuller). It is the enmity of the Serpent—active ever since the days of Abel (1 John 3:12)—against the holy seed.

"Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake." The connection between this and all that has been before us must not be overlooked. It is not every sufferer, nor even every sufferer for religion, who is entitled to appropriate such consolation. This antagonism is not in return for wrongdoing or in response to what has given just cause for offence. They who are morose, haughty, selfish, or evil-speaking, have no right to seek comfort from this Beatitude when people retaliate against them. No, it is where Christliness of character and conduct is assailed, where practical godliness condemns the worldly ways of empty professors and fires their enmity, where humble yet vital piety cannot be tolerated by those who are devoid of the
same. The wicked hate God’s holy image and those who bear it, His holy Truth and those who
walk in it. This pronouncement of Christ’s signifies, Blessed are the spiritual which the carnal
detest. How many a Christian employee who has refused to violate his conscience has suffered at
the hands of an ungodly master or mistress!

Yet such persecution, painful though it may be, is really a blessing in disguise.
1. First, by means of the opposition which they encounter, the Lord’s people become the
better acquainted with their own infirmities and needs, for thereby they are made
conscious that they cannot stand for a single hour unless Divine grace upholds them.
2. Second, by persecution they are often kept from certain sins into which they would most
likely fall were the wicked at peace with them: the rough usage they receive at the hands
of worldlings makes impossible that friendship with them which the flesh craves.
3. Third, such persecution affords the believer opportunity to glorify God by his constancy,
courage, and fidelity to the Truth.

This searching word "for righteousness’ sake" calls upon us to honestly examine ourselves
before God when we are being opposed: "But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief,
or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters” (1 Pet. 4:15). The same qualification
is made in the verse which immediately follows the last quoted: ‘Yet if any man suffer as a
Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf’: this is a most
necessary caution, that the believer see to it that he is buffeted for right doing and not on account
of his own misconduct or foolish behavior. It is to be observed that persecution is often so
speciously disguised that those guilty thereof are not conscious of the same, yea, so deceitful is
the human heart, they imagine they are doing God a service (John 16:2). But "Blessed are they
that are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is [not "shall be"] the kingdom of heaven ";
its privileges and blessings (Rom. 14:17) are theirs even now: though hated by men, they are
"kings and priests unto God" (Rev. 1:6).

Watson:

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake for theirs is the kingdom of
heaven. Matthew 5: 10
We are now come to the last beatitude: ‘Blessed are they which are persecuted . .’. Our Lord
Christ would have us reckon the cost. ‘Which of you intending to build a tower sittest not down
first and counteth the cost, whether he have enough to finish it?’ (Luke 14: 28). Religion will
cost us the tears of repentance and the blood of persecution. But we see here a great
encouragement that may keep us from fainting in the day of adversity. For the present, blessed;
for the future, crowned.

The words fall into two general parts.
1. The condition of the godly in this life: ‘They are persecuted’.
2. Their reward after this life: ‘Theirs is the kingdom of heaven’.
I shall speak chiefly of the first, and wind in the other in the applicatory. The observation is that
true godliness is usually attended with persecution. ‘We must through much tribulation enter into
the kingdom of God’ (Acts 14: 22). ‘The Jews
stirred up the chief men of the city and raised persecution against Paul . . .' (Acts 13: 50).
Though Christ died to take away the curse from us, yet not to take away the cross from us.

1. Those stones which are cut out for a building are first under the saw and hammer to be hewed and squared. The godly are called 'living stones' (1 Peter 2:5). And they must be hewn and polished by the persecutor's hand that they may be fit for the heavenly building.

2. The saints have no charter of exemption from trials. Though they be never so meek, merciful, pure in heart, their piety will not shield them from sufferings. Though the way to heaven be full of roses in regard of the comforts of the Holy Ghost, yet it is full of thorns in regard of persecutions.

3. It is a saying of Ambrose, 'There is no Abel but has his Cain.' St Paul fought with beasts at Ephesus (1 Corinthians 15: 32). Set it down as a maxim, if you will follow Christ, you must see the swords and staves. Put the cross in your creed.

For the amplification of this, there are several things we are to take cognizance of. 1 What is meant by persecution. 2 The several kinds of persecution. 3 Why there must be persecution. 4 The chief persecutions are raised against the ministers of Christ. 5 What that persecution is which makes a man blessed.

What is meant by persecution? The Greek word 'to persecute', signifies 'to vex and molest', sometimes 'to prosecute another', to 'arraign him at the bar', and 'to pursue him to the death'. A persecutor is a 'pricking briar' (Ezekiel 28: 24).

What are the several kinds of persecution? There is a twofold persecution; a persecution of the hand; a persecution of the tongue.

1. A persecution of the hand. 'Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted?' (Acts 7:52). 'For thy sake we are killed all the day long' (Romans 8: 36; Galatians 4: 29). This I call a bloody persecution, when the people of God are persecuted with fire and sword. So we read of the ten persecutions in the time of Nero, Domitian, Trajan etc.; and of the Marian persecution.

2. The persecution of the tongue, which is twofold.
   (i) Reviling. This few think of or lay to heart, but it is called in the text, persecution. 'When men shall revile you and persecute you'. This is tongue persecution. 'His words were drawn swords' (Psalm 55:21).
   (ii) Slandering. So it is in the text: 'When they shall persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely'.

Why there must be persecution. I answer for two reasons.

1. In regard of God: his decree and his design. God's Decree: 'We are appointed "hereunto' (1 Thessalonians 3: 3). Whoever brings the suffering, God sends it. .

God's Design. God has a twofold design in the persecutions of his children.
(i) Trials. 'Many shall be tried' (Daniel 12: 10). Persecution is the touchstone of sincerity. It discovers true saints from hypocrites. Unsound hearts pretend fair in prosperity, but in time of persecution fall away (Matthew 13: 20, 21).

(ii) Purity. God lets his children be in the furnace that they may be 'partakers of his holiness' (Hebrews 12: 10). The cross is physic. It purges out pride, impatience, love of the world. See how differently afflictions work upon the wicked and godly. They make the one worse, the other better.

The chief persecutions are raised against the ministers. Our Lord Christ turns himself directly to the apostles whom he was ready to commission and send abroad to preach: 'Blessed are ye when men shall persecute you' (verse 11). 'So persecuted they the prophets before you' (verse 12). 'Take, my brethren, the prophets for an example of suffering affliction' (James 5: 10).

1. All times are not like the silver age wherein Constantine lived. He was an honorer of the ministry. Ministers must not always look for such shines of the prince's favor.
   a. Peter, a famous preacher, knew how 'to cast the net on the right side of the ship', and at one sermon three thousand souls were converted. Yet neither the divinity of his doctrine nor the sanctity of his life could exempt him from persecution. 'When thou shalt be old, another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not'. It alludes to his suffering death for Christ. He was (says Eusebius) bound with chains and afterwards crucified at Jerusalem with his head downwards.
   b. Saint Paul, a holy man, who is steeled with courage, and fired with zeal, as soon as he entered into the ministry 'bonds and persecutions did abide him' (Acts 9:16; 20:23). He was made up of sufferings. 'I am ready to be offered up' (2 Timothy 4: 6). He alludes to the drink offerings wherein the wine or blood used in sacrifice was poured out, thereby intimating by what manner of death he should glorify God; not by being sacrificed in the fire, but by pouring out his blood, which was when he was beheaded. And that it might seem no strange thing for God's ministers to be under the heat and rage of persecution, Stephen puts the question, 'Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? ' (Acts 7: 52). Ignatius was torn with wild beasts. Cyprian, Polycarp martyred. Maximus, the emperor (as Eusebius relates), gave charge to his officers to put none to death but the governors and pastors of the Church.

The reasons why the storm of persecution has chiefly fallen upon the ministers are:

1. The ministers are Christ's ensign-bearers to carry his colors. They are the captains of the Lord's host, therefore they are the most shot at. 'I am set for the defence of the gospel' (Philippians 1: 17). The Greek word here used alludes to a soldier that is set in the forefront of the battle and has all the missiles flying about his ears. The minister's work is to preach against men's sins which are as dear to them as their right eye, and they cannot endure this.
   a. When Paul preached against Diana, all the city was in an uproar. We preach against men's Dianas, those sins which bring them in pleasure and profit. This causes an uproar.

2. From the malice of Satan. The ministers of Christ come to destroy his kingdom, therefore the old serpent will spit all his venom at them. If we tread upon the devil's head, he will bite us by the heel. The devil sets up several forts and garrisons in men's hearts – pride,
ignorance, unbelief. Now the weapons of the ministry beat down these strongholds (2 Corinthians 10: 4). Therefore Satan raises his militia, all the force and power of hell against the ministry.

A. It shows us what a work the ministry is; though full of dignity, yet full of danger. The persecution of the tongue is the most gentle persecution can be expected. It is not possible (says Luther) to be a faithful preacher and not to meet with trials and oppositions.

B. It shows the corruption of men’s nature since the fall. They are their own enemies. They persecute those who come to do them most good. What is the work of the ministry but to save men’s souls? to pull them as ‘brands out of the fire’. Yet they are angry at this. What is our work but to bring men to heaven? ‘We are ambassadors for Christ . . .’ (2 Corinthians 5: 20). We would have a peace made up between you and God; yet this is the folly of depraved nature, to requite evil for good.

C. If the fury of the world be against the ministers, then you that fear God had need pray much for them. ‘Pray for us, that the Word of the Lord may have free course, and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men.’ (2 Thessalonians 3: 1, 2).

The next thing to be explained is what that suffering persecution is which makes a man blessed.

1. I shall show what that suffering is which will not make us blessed.

(i) That suffering is not reckoned for martyrdom, when we pull a cross upon ourselves. There is little comfort in such suffering. Augustine speaks of some in his time who were called Circumcellions, who out of an itch rather than zeal of martyrdom, would run themselves into sufferings. We are bound by all lawful means to preserve our own lives. Jesus Christ did not suffer till he was called to it. Suspect that to be a temptation which bids us cast ourselves down into sufferings. When men through precipitance and rashness run themselves into trouble, it is a cross of their own making and not of God’s laying upon them.

(ii) That is not to be accounted martyrdom when we suffer for our offences. ‘Let none of you suffer as an evildoer’ (1 Peter 4: 15). ‘We indeed suffer justly’ (Luke 23: 41). I am not of Cyprian’s mind that the thief on the cross suffered as a martyr. No, he suffered as an evildoer! Christ indeed took pity on him and saved him. He died a saint, but not a martyr. When men suffer by the hand of the magistrate for their uncleanness, blasphemies etc., these do not suffer persecution, but execution. They die not as martyrs, but as malefactors. They suffer evil for being evil.

2. What that suffering persecution is which will make us blessed, and shall wear the crown of martyrdom.

(i) When we suffer in a good cause. So it is in the text. ‘Blessed are they which suffer for righteousness’ sake’. It is the cause that makes a martyr. When we suffer for the truth and espouse the quarrel of religion, this is to suffer for righteousness’ sake. ‘For the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain’ (Acts 28: 20).

(ii) When we suffer with a good conscience. A man may have a good cause and a bad conscience. He may suffer for ‘righteousness’ sake’, yet he himself be unrighteous. Saint Paul, as he had a just cause, so he had a pure conscience. ‘I have lived in all good conscience to this day’ (Acts 23: 1). Paul kept a good conscience to his dying day. It has made the saints go as cheerfully to the stake as if they had been going to a crown. Look to it that there be no flaw in conscience.
(iii) When we have a good call. 'Ye shall be brought before kings . . .' (Matthew 10: 18). There is no question but a man may so far consult for his safety that if God by his providence open a door, he may fly in time of persecution (Matthew 10: 23). But when he is brought before kings, and the case is such that either he must suffer or the truth must suffer, here is a clear call to suffering, and this is reckoned for martyrdom.

(iv) When we have good ends in our suffering, namely, that we may glorify God, set a seal to the truth, and show our love to Christ. 'Ye shall be brought before kings for my sake' (Matthew 10: 18).

(v) When we suffer as Christians. 'If any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed' (1 Peter 4: 16). To suffer as a Christian is to suffer with such a spirit as becomes a Christian, which is: When we suffer with patience. 'Take, my brethren, the prophets for an example of suffering affliction and of patience' (James 5: 10).

Tertullian was called an adamant for his invincible courage. Holy courage makes us (as one of the fathers says) ‘have such faces of brass that we are not ashamed of the cross’. What a spirit of gallantry was in Luther who said, writing to Melanchthon, ‘If it be not the cause of God we are embarked in, let us desert it! If it be his cause and will bear us out, why do we not stand to it?’ ‘They departed from the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name’ (Acts 5:41). Or as it is more emphatic in the original, 'They rejoiced that they were so far graced as to be disgraced for the name of Christ’. Tertullian says of the primitive Christians, that they took more comfort in their sufferings than in their deliverance. And indeed well may a Christian be joyful in suffering because it is a great favor when God honors a man to be a witness to the truth. Christ’s marks in Saint Paul's body were prints of glory. The saints have worn their sufferings as ornaments. Ignatius’ chains were his jewels. Never have any princes been so famous for their victories as the martyrs for their sufferings.

We suffer as Christians when we suffer and pray. 'Pray for them which despitefully use you' (Luke 6: 28).

There are two reasons why we should pray for our persecutors.

1. Because our prayers may be a means to convert them. Stephen prayed for his persecutors: 'Lord, lay not this sin to their charge' (Acts 7: 60). And this prayer was effectual to some of their conversions. Augustine says that the church of God was beholden to Stephen’s prayer for all that benefit which was reaped by Paul’s ministry.

2. We should pray for our persecutors because they do us good, though against their will. They shall increase our reward.

1 It shows us what the nature of Christianity is, namely, sanctity joined with suffering. A true saint carries Christ in his heart and the cross on his shoulders. ‘All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution’ (2 Timothy 3: 12). Persecution is the legacy bequeathed by Christ to his people. 'In the world ye shall have tribulation' (John 16:33). Christ's spouse is a lily among thorns. ‘Think it not strange concerning the fiery trial’ (1 Peter 4: 12). If we are God’s gold, it is not strange to be cast into the fire.

2 See hence that persecutions are not signs of God’s anger or fruits of the curse, for ‘blessed are they that are persecuted’. Persecutions are pledges of God’s love, badges of honor (Hebrews 12:
7). In the sharpest trial there is the sweetest comfort. God’s fanning his wheat is but to make it purer.

1. Let it exhort Christians to think beforehand and make account of sufferings. This reckoning beforehand can do us no hurt; it may do us much good.
   (i) The fore-thoughts of suffering will make a Christian very serious. The heart is apt to be feathery and frothy. The thoughts of suffering persecution would consolidate it.
   (ii) The fore-thoughts of sufferings would make them lighter when they come.
   (iii) Fore-thoughts of persecution would put us in mind of getting our armor ready. He will have the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit ready, that he may not be surprised unawares.

How shall we prepare for sufferings? Do three things.
1. Be persons rightly qualified for suffering.
2. Avoid those things which will hinder suffering.
3. Promote all helps to suffering.
   1. Labor to be persons rightly qualified for suffering. Be righteous persons. That man who would suffer ‘for righteousness’ sake’ must himself be righteous. I mean evangelically righteous. In particular I call him righteous:
      (i) who breathes after sanctity (Psalm 119: 5). Though sin cleaves to his heart yet his heart does not cleave to sin.
      (ii) A righteous person is one who makes God’s grace his center.
      He prefers the glory of God before credit, estate, relations. It was the speech of Kiliaz, that blessed martyr, 'Had I all the gold in the world to dispose of, I would give it to live with my relations (though in prison), yet Jesus Christ is dearer to me than all.'
      (iii) A righteous person is one who values the jewel of a good conscience at an high rate. A good man had rather sustain hurt in his body or estate than his conscience should be hurt.
2. Avoid those things which will hinder suffering.
   (i) The love of the world. 'Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world' (2 Timothy 4: 10). He not only forsook Paul's company but his doctrine. The love of the world chokes our zeal.
   (ii) Carnal fear. There is a twofold fear:
      A filial fear, when a man fears to displease God. When he fears he should not hold out, this is a good fear.
      (iii) Take heed of a facile spirit. A facile-spirited man will be turned any way with a word. He will be wrought as wax. He is so tame that you may lead him whither you will. ‘With fair speeches they deceive the hearts of the simple’ (Romans 16: 18).
      (iv) Take heed of listening to the voice of the flesh.
3. Promote those things which will help to suffer.
   (i) Inure yourselves to suffering. 'As a good soldier of Christ endure hardship' (2 Timothy 2: 3). The bearing of a lighter cross will fit for the bearing of an heavier. Learn to bear a reproach with patience and then you will be fitter to bear an iron chain.
   (ii) Be well skilled in the knowledge of Christ. A man can never die for him he does not know. ‘For which cause I suffer those things; for I know whom I have believed’ (2 Timothy 1: 12).
      Enrich yourselves with knowledge. Know Christ in his virtues, offices, privileges. See the
preciousness in Christ. ‘To you that believe he is precious’ (1 Peter 2:7). His name is precious; it is as ointment poured forth. His blood is precious; it is as balm poured forth. His love is precious; it is as wine poured forth. Jesus Christ is made up of all sweets and delights. He himself is all that is desirable. He is light to the eye, honey to the taste, joy to the heart. Get but the knowledge of Christ and you will part with all for him. You will embrace him though it be in the fire.

(iii) Prize every truth of God. Truth is the object of faith (2 Thessalonians 2: 13), the seed of regeneration (James 1: 18), the spring of joy (1 Corinthians 13: 6). Truth crowns us with salvation (1 Timothy 2:4). If ever you would suffer for the truth, prize it above all things. He that does not prize truth above life will never lay down his life for the truth. The blessed martyrs sealed to the truth with their blood. There are two things God counts most dear to him, his glory and his truth.

(iv) Keep a good conscience. If there be any sin allowed in the soul, it will unfit for suffering. A man that has a boil upon his shoulders cannot carry a heavy burden. Guilt of conscience is like a boil. Let conscience be pure. 'Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience' (1 Timothy 3: 9). A good conscience will abide the fiery trial. Let one be in prison, good conscience is a bird that can sing in this cage. Augustine calls it ‘the paradise of a good conscience’.

(v) Make the Scripture familiar to you (Psalm 119: 50). The Scripture well digested by meditation will fit for suffering. The Scripture is a Christian's palladium, his magazine and fortroyal. It may be compared to the ‘tower of David on which there hang a thousand bucklers’ (Canticles 4: 4). ‘Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly’ (Colossians 3: 16). Jerome speaks of one who by frequent studying the Scripture made his breast ‘the library of Christ’. The blessed Scripture as it is an honeycomb for comfort, so an armory for strength.

(vi) Get a suffering frame of heart. What is that? you say. I answer: A self-denying frame. ‘They loved not their lives unto the death’ (Luke 14: 26; Revelation 12: 11). Jesus Christ was dearer to them than their own heart's blood. 'Whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is heaven' (Matthew 10: 33).

(vii) Get suffering graces; these three in particular: Faith; Love; Patience.
1 Suffering grace is faith. 'Above all, taking the shield of faith' (Ephesians 6: 16).
2 Suffering grace is love. Get hearts fired with love to the Lord Jesus. Love is a grace both active and passive.
   (1) Love is active. It lays a law of constraint upon the soul; ‘The love of Christ constrains us’ (2 Corinthians 5: 14).
   (2) Love is passive; it enables to suffer. A man that loves his friend will suffer anything for him rather than he shall be wronged.
3 The third suffering grace is patience. Patience is a grace made and cut out for suffering. Patience is a sweet submission to the will of God, whereby we are content to bear anything that he is pleased to lay upon us. Patience makes a Christian invincible. It is like the anvil that bears all strokes.

(viii) Treasure up suffering promises. The promises are faith's bladders to keep it from sinking. They are the breast-milk a Christian lives on in time of sufferings. They are honey at the end of the rod. Hoard up the promises.

(ix) Set before your eyes suffering examples. Look upon others as patterns to imitate. ‘Take my brethren the prophets for an example of suffering affliction’ (James 5: 10). Examples have more influence upon us than precepts. The one instruct, the other animate. When John Huss was brought to be burned, they put upon his head a triple crown of paper printed with red devils, which when he saw, says he. ‘My Lord Jesus Christ wore a crown of thorns for me, why then
shall I not wear this crown, how ignominious soever?’ Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, when he
came before the proconsul was bidden to deny Christ and swear by the Emperor; he replied: ‘I
have served Christ these eighty-six years and he has not once hurt me, and shall I deny him
now?’ Saunders that blessed martyr, said, ‘Welcome the cross of Christ; my Savior began to me
in a bitter cup and shall not I pledge him? You Baynham, you papist that look for miracles, I feel
no more pain in the fire than if I were in a bed of down.’

Another of the martyrs said, ‘The ringing of my chain has been sweet music in my ears. O what a
comforter (says he) is a good conscience!’ Another martyr, kissing the stake, said, ‘I shall not
lose my life but change it for a better. Instead of coals I shall have pearls!’ Another, when the
chain was fastening to him, said, ‘Blessed be God for this wedding girdle!’ These suffering
examples we should lay up. God is still the same God. He has as much love in his heart to pity us
and as much strength in his arm to help us.  Let us be of St Paul's mind: 'Not counting my life
dear, so that I might finish my course with joy' (Acts 20: 24).

(x) Let us lay in suffering considerations. A wise Christian is considerative. Consider whom we
suffer for. It is for Christ, and we cannot suffer for a better friend.

Our sufferings are light. This ‘light affliction . . .’ (2 Corinthians 4: 17) Affliction is light in
comparison of glory. The weight of glory makes persecution light. If, says Chrysostom, the
torments of all the men in the world could be laid upon one man, it were not worth one hour’s
being in heaven.

Our sufferings are short: 'After ye have suffered awhile' (1 Peter 5: 10); or as it is in the Greek, ‘a
little’. Our sufferings may be lasting, not everlasting. Affliction is compared to a 'cup'
(Lamentations 4: 21). While we suffer for Christ we suffer with Christ: ‘If we suffer with him . . .
’ (Romans 8: 17). Oh, says the Christian, I shall never be able to hold out. But remember you
suffer with Christ. He helps you to suffer. As our blest Savior said: ‘I am not alone; the Father is
with me’ (John 16: 32); so a believer may say, ‘I am not alone, my Christ is with me’. He bears
the heaviest end of the cross. ‘My grace is sufficient for thee’ (2 Corinthians 12: 9). 'Underneath
are the everlasting arms' (Deuteronomy 33: 27). If Christ put the yoke of persecution
over us, he will put his arms under us. The Lord Jesus will not only crown us when we conquer,
but he will enable us to conquer.

(xi) The great suffering consideration is the glorious reward which follows sufferings: 'Theirs is
the kingdom of heaven. 'The hope of reward, says Saint Basil, is very powerful and moving.
Moses had an eye at the 'recompense of reward' (Hebrews 11:26), yea, Christ himself (Hebrews
12: 2). Many have done great things for hope of a temporal reward. If men will hazard their lives
for a little temporal honor, what should we do for the reward of glory? A merchant, says
Chrysostom, does not mind a few storms at sea, but he thinks of the emolument and gain when
the ship comes fraught home. So a Christian should not be over-solicitous about his present
sufferings, but think of the rich reward when he shall arrive at the heavenly port. 'Great is your
reward in heaven' (verse 12). The cross is a golden ladder by which we climb up to heaven. A
Christian may lose his life, but not his reward. He may lose his head, but not his crown.

If you would be able to suffer, pray much. Beg of God to clothe you with a spirit of zeal and
magnanimity. 'To you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to
suffer for his sake' (Philippians 1: 29). It is a gift of God to be able to suffer. Pray for this gift.
Do not think you can be able of yourselves to lay down life and liberty for Christ. Peter was
overconfident of himself. ‘I will lay down my life for thy sake’ (John 13: 37). But Peter's
strength undid him. Peter had habitual grace, but he lacked auxiliary grace. Christians need fresh gales from heaven. Pray for the Spirit to animate you in your sufferings. As the fire hardens the potter’s vessel which is at first weak and limber, so the fire of the Spirit hardens men against sufferings. Pray that God will make you like the anvil that you may bear the strokes of persecutors with invincible patience.

References