

Psalm 119:161-168 (SCHIN)

The Christian's Antidote for Persecution

Princes have persecuted me without a cause: but my heart standeth in awe of thy word – v. 161

Many commentators believe that David wrote this Psalm. If that is indeed the case then we would have no trouble finding the historical setting for v. 161 – *Princes have persecuted me without a cause*. The word *princes* carries the meaning of rulers or governors. The verse therefore brings to mind the times that David had to flee from Saul. It seems that no matter how often Saul's attempts to hunt down David were thwarted by the Lord, Saul would not give up his intense pursuit of David. He viewed David as a rival to his throne who must, therefore, be pursued and apprehended and executed.

The history of the church is to a large degree a history of persecution – whether it be the persecution of the Christians at Jerusalem in Acts 8 – or whether it be the persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire or the persecution of Christians throughout the time when the apostate church of Rome had full sway – or whether it be in the times of the Scottish covenanters. We're actually coming next month to the 250th anniversary of the Act of Uniformity – which forced some 2000 ministers from Scotland out of their pulpits and eventually led to a period in Scottish history that would be called *the killing time*.

Foxe's book of Martyrs documents very thoroughly the truth that the history of the church of Christ is a history of persecution. This persecution has taken place and indeed is taking place even at this present hour. In a recent issue of *The Voice of the Martyrs* the headline read: *Iranian Persecution Increases: Persecution continues without letup in Iran, according to several news sources. Several believers in Shiraz were arrested while worshipping in a private home on February 8. Family members have no idea where those arrested are being held. Also in February, the Iranian government ordered the last two officially registered Christian churches to discontinue their services on Friday, when most Iranians are off work and would be able to attend.*

There are certainly many today who could affirm the words of our text *Princes have persecuted me without a cause*. This is not the first mention of persecution in the 119th Psalm:

- Ps 119:84 *How many are the days of thy servant? when wilt thou execute judgment on them that persecute me?*
- Ps 119:86 *All thy commandments [are] faithful: they persecute me wrongfully; help thou me.*
- Ps 119:157 *Many [are] my persecutors and mine enemies; [yet] do I not decline from thy testimonies.*

The thing I want you to see from the text this morning, however, is that persecution was not the thing that dominated the Psalmist's heart. What a contrast we find between the two

parts of this text. The first part reads: *Princes have persecuted me without a cause*. You might expect the next part of the verse to read something like – *woe is me, my persecutors are many* or *woe is me the Christian life is so hard*. But notice that the second part of the verse says nothing like that – it says rather *Princes have persecuted me without a cause: but my heart standeth in awe of thy word*.

Isn't that an incredible statement? And doesn't such a statement show you in increasing measure the value of God's word? I had the privilege of preaching at the Wheeler Mission this last Friday. Most of the people who stay at the Wheeler Mission have little or nothing, although I find it interesting how many of them still seem to have cell phones or other mobile devices. But for the most part they're hurting financially. One man asked me to pray for him after the service and shared with me that when his time is up at the Mission he has no place to go.

Notwithstanding their poverty I made it a point of emphasis that if they came to the Wheeler Mission with no Bible and could leave the Wheeler Mission with a Bible they would be leaving the Wheeler Mission rich because they would have in their possession the words of eternal life.

One of the reasons that we're rich when we possess God's word is because God's word has much to say about our trials and afflictions. It has much to say on the subject of persecution. And that's the issue I would like to address from this section of the Psalm this morning – this issue of persecution.

What I want you to consider with me in particular is:

The Christian's Antidote for Persecution

An antidote is defined as a substance that counteracts the effects of a toxin or something that will take away or reduce the bad effects of something unpleasant or undesirable. The Psalmist certainly demonstrates for us the effectiveness of such an antidote. Let's look at that antidote this morning then under three headings. Consider with me first of all that God's word serves as that antidote:

I. By Teaching Us What to Expect

Note the words in v. 161 *Princes have persecuted me without a cause*. Underscore those words *without a cause*. Usually when something is done without a cause it's also done unexpectedly. We like to think that we live in a world that's rationale or reasonable so when things are done they're usually done for a reason. But in the case of persecution there is no reason. At least there's no reason that a Christian can detect.

From a different perspective, however, from the perspective of sinful men there is a reason. It's not a reason the world will readily admit but it's a reason we learn from Christ. The reason that Christians are persecuted is because Christ is hated by sinners. Listen to the words of Christ from Jn. 15:18-20 *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 his 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.

A few verse later in v. 25 we find Christ using the very phrase of our text *without a cause. But this cometh to pass, that the word might be fulfilled that is written in their law, They hated me without a cause.* That phrase *without a cause* is a single word in the Greek which in other places is translated by the word *freely*. We find that same term used by Paul in Rom. 3:24 *Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus* – or being justified without a cause. In this verse in Romans the term makes reference to our merit – there is no basis in our merit for our justification. With reference to our merit our justification is without a cause.

So in the case of Christ in Jn. 15:25 you could say that there was no basis in Christ's merit that could have earned or deserved the hatred of sinners. In spite of the fact that he taught them the truth and went about the country doing good they still hated him. And because there is this indwelling animosity toward Christ that springs from the sinful nature of man there will also be animosity toward those that identify with Christ. *If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.*

I think it comes as a shock to new Christians that the world doesn't rejoice with them when get saved. I can certainly recall how surprised I was to learn how underwhelming my salvation was to the minds and hearts of others. And this is initially a hard thing for the young Christian to grasp. After all he's found freedom from sin's guilt and sin's power. A heavy burden has dropped from the new Christian's shoulders so to speak. He's found a peace that he's never known before. He has cause for joy and rejoicing because of the prospects of heaven and everlasting life.

You would think that those that are near and dear to him who were yet outside of Christ would be thrilled and would be interested and would want the same blessings that the Christian has gained but alas – they not only are not interested but they don't really want to even hear about it. And so the new Christian's reaction to the reactions toward him is one of utter astonishment. *What's wrong with these people?* – he says to himself *that they don't want for themselves the wonderful blessings that I've gained for myself? Don't they understand that it's free? Don't they get it that salvation is a free gift that only has to be received by faith?*

I say that's the new Christian's initial reaction. Eventually he comes to learn that the world hates him without a cause because the world hated Christ without a cause. The world hates Christ because sinners by nature are rebels against Christ who prefer sin over Christ. Once the new believer learns from God's word the extent of man's sinfulness then that Christian will no longer be amazed so much at the world's hostility as he becomes amazed at his own salvation.

That new believer will come to learn, you see, that he too hated Christ without a cause – that he too was a rebel against God who loved his sin and who would have clung to his sin were it not for a powerful and gracious force that compelled him to let go of sin and embrace Jesus Christ as he was freely offered in the gospel.

The first step, then, in an antidote to persecution is to learn to expect it and don't be surprised by it. Peter writes in his first epistle 4:12,13 *Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.*

There is an aspect to such fiery trials, you see, that contributes to your conformity to Christ. A part of your sanctification is being made conformable unto his death and what that means in plain and practical terms is that you will bear something of the brunt of the world's hatred for him because of the way you identify with him and own him to be your Savior. When you view persecution this way you'll come to see it the apostles saw it. They actually saw it as a privilege.

When they were brought before the council in Acts 5 and were reminded that they had been charged not to teach in the name of Jesus and they were beaten and then released, we read in Acts 5:41 *And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.*

You remember also the words of Christ from the Sermon on the Mount. In that portion known as the beatitudes he pronounces a double blessing on those that are persecuted. So we read in Mt. 5:10-12 *Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.*

We know of course that it's not easy or natural to rejoice and be exceeding glad when it comes to the matter of persecution. Persecution at times is severe. I read earlier a portion of an article in *The Voice of the Martyrs* that reported on worshippers of Christ being apprehended and imprisoned and their family members don't even know where they're being held. It's hard to imagine anything more painful for a family member to bear and this is why we must pray for our persecuted brethren and see ourselves as bound with them.

So while the first part of the antidote to persecution alerts us to the reality of it in such a way that we'll not think it strange – the truth is that we need much more than this to withstand and overcome it. And this leads to my next consideration regarding this antidote for not only does God's word serve as an antidote by teaching us what to expect but it also serves as an antidote:

II. By Effecting Our Perspective

And by adjusting our perspective what I mean to say is that God's word enables you to view the bigger picture. Look again at the words of v. 161 and note again the contrast that I pointed out in my introduction: *Princes have persecuted me without a cause: but my heart standeth in awe of thy word.*

Of the two parts or clauses that make up this verse it's not hard to detect which thing dominated the Psalmist's heart. Is he taken up with the difficult challenges of persecution or is he taken up with something else? It's very apparent that he's taken up with something else. This is not to say that he doesn't feel the pain of persecution. Earlier in the Psalm in v. 84 we find his petition or his complaint when he says to God *How many are the days of thy servant? when wilt thou execute judgment on them that persecute me?* And in v. 86 *All thy commandments are faithful: they persecute me wrongfully; help thou me.*

We must guard ourselves against any kind of misconceptions about persecution as if to suggest that it's possible to become so heavenly minded that we can somehow be oblivious to persecution. Such a notion becomes a phony ideal. But on the other hand neither should the Christian be so dominated either by the reality or the potential for persecution that persecution becomes the only thing he can think about.

This section of Psalm 119 makes it evident that it wasn't persecution that dominated the Psalmist's heart so much as it was the awesomeness of God's word. *My heart standeth in awe of thy word.* And isn't there much in God's word to cause our hearts to stand in awe?

Do you not find yourself standing in awe that you're on the side of persecution that you're on? In other words you are among the persecuted rather than among the persecutors. You hated God and hated Christ as much as anyone. You were dead in trespasses and sins. You were in love with sin and you hated anyone or anything that dared to call you out on your sin. You had your part, spiritually speaking, in joining the crowd that called out for Christ to be crucified.

But look at you now – you're a trophy of grace. Something awesome has happened to you. Your eyes were opened and your ears were unstopped. You gained the inward illumination of heart to see that you were on the broad road headed for destruction and then your attention was drawn again to Christ but this time you saw him not as the One that you called out to be crucified but you've come to see him, rather, as the One that died in your place. You've come to see the plan of salvation and the purpose of Christ's coming and being put to death.

And by seeing such a matchless display of love and contrasting it to what you know to be your unworthiness for such love, your heart stands in awe. Or your heart stands in awe of Christ in his glory. You see him now ruling over this world and advancing his kingdom. And while you have the spiritual discernment to see that the kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed your heart is awed by the truth that he that sitteth in the heavens laughs at their schemes. And you're awed by the glorious truth that God has set his king upon his holy hill of Zion.

These are but a few of the things that are conveyed to your heart by the Spirit of God through the word of God that move your heart to stand in awe. It's no wonder, then, that the Psalmist goes on to say in this section of Psalm 119 *I rejoice at thy word, as one that findeth great spoil*. You have found great spoil or great treasure in God's word if you have read and appropriated that word to the saving of your soul.

Look also at what the Psalmist says in v. 164 *Seven times a day do I praise thee because of thy righteous judgments*. Verse 165 *Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them*. Verse 166 *LORD, I have hoped for thy salvation, and done thy commandments*.

When you look at these verses and compare and contrast them to the statement in v. 161 that *Princes have persecuted me without a cause* then it's not hard to discern what is truly dominating the Psalmist's heart. And this is what makes the word of God a real and true antidote to persecution. When salvation rules your heart to the point that you're engaged in the practice of praise seven times a day then you haven't escaped persecution but you've definitely risen above it.

And when the truth of your acceptance and standing with God through Christ fills and thrills your heart then you'll be able to say, even amidst great persecution, that *Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing* (not even persecution) *shall offend them*. The antidote to persecution, then, is found in being taken up with the greatness of God and the greatness of Christ.

The apostles illustrate this for us in Acts 4 where they are arrested for the first time and charged not to teach or preach Christ. We read in that chapter beginning with v. 23 *And being let go, they went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them. 24 And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is: 25 Who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? 26 The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. 27 For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, 28 For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done. 29 And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, 30 By stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus*.

Doesn't this prayer perfectly illustrate the point I'm making that the word of God adjusts our perspective and enables us to see the bigger picture? Do you see how the apostles are so taken up with the greatness of God and the greatness of Christ? When it comes to the matter of their arrest and their persecution their petition is simply: *And now, Lord, behold their threatenings*.

We learn, therefore, what to look for and what to expect when we open our Bibles. You should expect to see Christ in his glory. You should seek to behold him in his glory. You expect to learn of the greatness of your salvation and when you behold these things in God's word then your heart will stand in awe and you'll find yourself compelled to praise and you won't experience any disruption to your peace or your joy by any set of external circumstances.

So the word of God provides the antidote to persecution by teaching us what to expect. It provides the antidote to persecution by adjusting our perspective on things. Consider with me finally that the word of God provides the antidote to persecution:

III. By Directing Our Actions

And by directing our actions I'm referring now to the way we are to strive for the greater obedience of faith. Note the words of vv. 166 – 168 *LORD, I have hoped for thy salvation, and done thy commandments. My soul hath kept thy testimonies; and I love them exceedingly. I have kept thy precepts and thy testimonies: for all my ways are before thee.*

Despite the challenge of his trials and afflictions and despite the unjust treatment of cruel men that would persecute him wrongly, the Psalmist, nevertheless, continues to strive for the obedience of faith. His hope doesn't change – his hope is in God's salvation and his affections haven't changed – he still loves the ways of the Lord; and his consciousness hasn't changed – he's still aware that all his ways are before God.

Therefore he continues to strive for obedience. He continues to keep God's precepts and testimonies. He continues to walk in close communion with his God. I'm reminded of Daniel when I read these verses. Daniel, you may recall, was promoted above all the other wise men and rulers in Persia. He became the object of their jealousy because of his preference before the king over them.

So they plotted against him and managed to manipulate the king into passing a law that made prayer and worship illegal to any source other than the king. We read in Daniel 6:10 *Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime.*

Do you see how the change in external circumstances did not alter Daniel's practice? He prayed and gave thanks before his God the same way he had always done. He refused to make exception to his regular practice. He loved the Lord and needed the Lord too much to take exception to his regular practice of prayer and thanksgiving.

I think it would be fair to surmise that Daniel wasn't surprised by the actions of his rivals. He was, after all, living in a land of captivity. He was not among those that feared God so he wouldn't have expected to find favor with them. And we certainly know of Daniel that he saw the big picture. He's the one that received the vision from God that showed the course of the coming kingdoms, how one would replace another and how the kingdom of God, symbolized by that stone cut out without hands, would smite the others

and bring them down and then grow into a great mountain that would fill the earth. His knowledge and his vision compelled him to continue in his devotion and continue in his obedience.

So should we as Christians find ourselves compelled to be steadfast in the obedience of faith. Some would make excuses out of difficulties to relax their strivings for obedience. The Psalmist knew nothing of making such excuses nor should we. We have the same advantages of the Psalmist, you see.

You know what to expect. You're told to think it not strange. And you have the bigger picture. Your perspective, I trust, has been shaped by the vision of the greatness of God and the greatness of Christ and the greatness of your salvation accomplished by Christ. There is much in God's word to make your heart stand in awe.

I trust, therefore, that you'll be steadfast in your obedience because you're compelled to obedience by your love to Christ and your love for the ways that are pleasing to him. May it indeed be your experience and confession that you have great peace. May you confess the truth with the Psalmist that *Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them.* And may you from that great peace continue to strive to be faithful to Christ, come what may. You are certainly fortified by God's word for such striving. May God grant to us that nothing will pull us down from the One who loved us and gave himself for us.