

Leaping For Joy In The Midst Of Persecution

Galatians 5:22

Luke 6:22-23

June 29, 2014

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What would possibly cause a Christian to leap for joy in the midst of suffering persecution, when falsely accused, isolated, imprisoned, tortured, or facing a cruel death? When a Christian is rejoicing in the Lord as persecution rises like a mighty wave to swallow him/her up, there must be a heavenly perspective that the Christian has learned transcends a worldly perspective. For, dear ones, a mere worldly perspective would lead us to compromise in order to avoid persecution, to join the ranks of the persecutor (“if you can’t beat them, join them”), or to be mired in abject despair at such circumstances that involve our persecution. What has led faithful witnesses and martyrs of Christ to rejoice in the midst of the fiery furnace into which the enemies of Christ have cast God’s people? For, dear ones, it is one thing to know that we are commanded to rejoice in the midst of persecution and tribulation, it is another thing to experience that joy of the Lord in the midst of persecution and tribulation.

This Lord’s Day we conclude our study of the joy of the Lord, which is the second fruit that is mentioned as growing on the vine of a Christian in all of the circumstances that we face in life (Galatians 5:22). One might think that persecution is a hindrance to growing the joy of the Lord in our lives, but as we shall see, persecution can actually be a catalyst (a means of pruning the branch) that actually yields a fullness of joy in the Lord. Let us consider the following two main points from our text: (1) The True Nature of Persecution (Luke 6:22); and (2) The True Reason For Joy In The Midst of Persecution (Luke 6:23).

I. The True Nature of Persecution (Luke 6:22).

A. Of all the Beatitudes (Blessings) of our Lord that He delivered in the Sermon on the Mount, this is one that many Christians would just as well pass by without much thought or reflection. We would prefer to be safe, secure, and comfortable, rather than persecuted. I know because I have the same struggles. How we Western Christians love that word, “comfortable”; and not only a comfortable lifestyle, but also a comfortable Christianity that doesn’t rock the boat. Thus, decisions, doctrines, practices that might upset our comfort zone by way of persecution, attacks, or alienation from others are kept by many Christians at arm’s length. This Beatitude (Blessing) of our Lord reminds us afresh that living a Christian life is not about our comfort and ease, but is rather about the glory of God and our faithfulness to Jesus Christ and His truth: “Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man’s sake” (Luke 6:22). The Lord Jesus did not make suffering persecution for His sake optional in the Christian life (nor did Paul, 2 Timothy 3:12). All Christians will suffer for Christ to a lesser or greater degree.

B. As we consider the nature of persecution, it is necessary to distinguish between suffering and persecution, because all suffering is not persecution, whereas all persecution is some form of suffering. Note that suffering refers to all bodily afflictions (whether it be a suffering for evil or for righteousness, 1 Peter 4:15-16). However, persecution is that form of suffering that applies only to suffering for the truth and righteousness of Christ (Luke 6:22; Matthew 5:10-11). Thus, when one suffers for a false religion, or for breaking a Moral Commandment of God, he/she is not being persecuted.

1. For example, all those who were destroyed in the flood

that covered the whole earth were not persecuted, but were righteously judged. The prophets of Baal who were executed by the authority of God's prophet (Elijah) were not persecuted, but were righteously judged. When Jesus used a whip to drive the money changers out of the temple, not once but twice (John 2:13-17; Matthew 21:12-13), they were not persecuted, but were righteously judged. When Paul blinded the false prophet, Elymas, who withstood the truth of the gospel (Acts 13:6-12), this false prophet was not persecuted, but was righteously judged. The issue is not whether one is sincere for that which he/she suffers, but rather whether one is suffering persecution for the sake of the pure gospel of Jesus Christ and for the holy commandments of God (e.g. in doctrine, worship, and church government). All of these examples just mentioned are in fact warnings to the wicked that unless they repent, they will all likewise perish in eternal torment—hell is not persecution, but is the righteous judgment of God.

2. Next, let it be observed that persecution for the truth and righteousness of Christ comes in various forms.

a. Persecution may come from Satan through illnesses and calamities in this life (as in the case of Job). What you are suffering by way of illness, setbacks, and trials may be persecution brought by Satan for your faithfulness to Christ. There may not be a visible hand directing that persecution, but it may be very real persecution. Of course, even when this is the case, the Lord is in full control and is using this persecution for His glory and for our good—even demonstrating to the angelic world His power and mercy to His dear, struggling children.

b. Persecution may come in the form of violent attacks against the life or limb of those who profess the true Christian religion and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

(1) From the very beginning we read of such persecution against the faithful witnesses of Christ: Abel was murdered by his brother, Cain, for his pure worship; Joseph was sold into slavery

and cast into prison for his faithfulness and purity; Jeremiah was cast into a cistern and left to die for faithfully prophesying on behalf of God; John the Baptist was imprisoned for preaching against the incest of Herod and subsequently beheaded; Stephen was stoned to death for his faithful testimony for Christ; Paul was beaten, imprisoned, and stoned and left for dead for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ; and supremely our glorious Savior was beaten, punched, crowned with a crown of thorns, and crucified for declaring He was the Son of God.

(2) Indeed, hundreds of thousands of Bible-believing Christians (like the Albigenses, the Waldenses, and the Reformed Christians in the Reformation) have been tortured, had property confiscated, imprisoned, and slaughtered by means of the Papacy working together with emperors, kings, and princes of Europe (especially beginning in the middle ages), all of which is figuratively portrayed in the prophetic language we find in Revelation 17 of the harlot Church of Rome (drunken with the blood of the saints) riding upon back of the civil beast.

(3) The Inquisition was used by the Church of Rome for over 600 years (1231-1834) to torture and to obtain the confessions of Bible-believing Christians in support of Roman Catholic heresies (like the bodily presence of Christ in the Mass). The use of torture was authorized in 1252 by Pope Innocent IV. Some of the more popular methods of torture included flogging, burning various parts of the body, the rack (which slowly pulled limbs out of socket), the roasting of feet over burning coals, and the boot (which slowly crushed the bones of the feet). And though the papacy now verbally denounces torture (due to the independence of nations from the strict control of the papacy and the toleration imposed within nations), the torture of the past has not been repudiated by the papal antichrist, for to do so would condemn the official practice of torture approved by the papacy for hundreds of years.

(4) Faithful witnesses and martyrs for Christ yet suffer violent persecution in Communist nations, in Islamic nations, in

Hindu nations, and in Roman Catholic nations. And even in Western nations the children of Christian families are violently taken away from parents who homeschool for allegedly abusing their children.

(5) Here in the United States, those Christians who own businesses are being persecuted and being required to pay for the abortions of those who work for them (under Obamacare), and being required to make wedding cakes for same-sex weddings or to take photographs for same-sex weddings. It will not be long (if we continue on this downward path) that ministers will be fined/imprisoned for preaching against same-sex “marriages”. According to recent polls, a majority of Americans now support this complete destruction of God’s institution of marriage.

(6) Christians who believe and obey the commandments of God are attacked in the work place for testifying that they cannot work on the Christian Sabbath. Dear ones, persecution is here and is likely to increase as the Church of Christ grows silent in standing for the truth and as the bestial civil government continues to impose its wicked laws upon Christians.

c. Persecution is, however, not limited to the use of physical force or violence, but persecution according to Christ may also involve threatening words, mocking, insulting, reproaching, and verbally attacking those who are professing and practicing the truth and righteousness of Christ as revealed in Scripture (Luke 6:22). Smiting with the tongue may (according to God’s Word) be persecution as well as smiting with the sword or with a club (Job’s wife—“curse God and die”).

(1) But again it must be remembered that verbal persecution can only be committed against those who profess and practice the truth and righteousness of Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture. Thus, it is not persecution to speak against or to verbally smite false teachers for their wickedness in leading souls away from the truth and righteousness of Christ or against wicked laws that attack the

righteous laws of God (Matthew 23:13-33; Acts 8:20-24; 2 Corinthians 11:13-14; Revelation 2:6,15).

(2) Although we may not be guilty of persecuting a false teacher in smiting him with our tongue, we may be guilty of pride, arrogance, or personal vengeance, rather than being motivated out of love for Christ and His truth and righteousness. Our smiting with the tongue may be to draw attention to ourselves rather than to Christ—to promote ourselves rather than Christ. It is so easy, dear ones, to justify our offending others with a proud heart and with angry, vindictive words by standing upon the truth which was proclaimed. If there is offence taken against what we testify as faithful witnesses of Christ, let it be the truth and righteousness of Christ that offends, and not our proud, obnoxious words and behavior (let our hearts weep over obstinate disobedience to God’s commandments even as we necessarily testify against obstinate disobedience to God’s commandments, Psalm 119:136: “Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law”).

d. Before moving on to our last main point, I also want to make clear that suffering persecution is not a meritorious work. Suffering persecution does not make us acceptable or more acceptable in the sight of God. For we cannot be more acceptable in the sight of God than we are at the time that God justifies us on the basis of Christ’s righteousness through faith alone in Christ alone. We do not suffer for the Lord in order to atone for our sins or in order to perform some sacrificial work which God will accept as meritorious in His sight (Ephesians 2:8-10; Titus 3:4-7). Contrary to the Church of Rome, the suffering of Christians in this life (or in some make-believe place called “purgatory”) is not efficacious in remitting and purging the Christian of temporary punishment due to sin (A New Catechism of the Catholic Faith, pp. 114,115, Questions 1,8,11)—only the once-offered sacrifice of Christ washes away sin and its punishment, Hebrews 10:14.

II. The True Reason for Joy in The Midst of Persecution (Luke 6:23).

A. The blessedness of suffering persecution is not in suffering persecution for persecution's sake. No, the blessedness of suffering persecution here upon the earth for the sake and cause of Christ is the joy of the Lord that well up within us as Christians because our suffering persecution in this life for the cause of Christ is a confirmation and testimony that our reward in heaven is great and that we are walking in the same faithful footsteps of the prophets of old, as did Abel, as did Joseph, as did Jeremiah, as did John the Baptist, as did the Apostle Paul, and as did Christ our Head to whom we are joined (John 15:20; Acts 9:4).

B. Dear ones, the joy of the faithful witnesses and martyrs of Christ has always been in their confident hope of heaven. These faithful witnesses have rejoiced in their suffering because they saw beyond their suffering the everlasting delights of heaven that awaited them.

1. The glory and joy of heaven cannot be expressed in human words as we see from the testimony of the Apostle Paul (in 2 Corinthians 12:4). How do you explain a place so full of holiness and righteousness, so complete in joy and delight, so perfect in peace and security, so abounding in fellowship and communion, that anything to which you might try to compare it upon the earth would only scratch the surface? "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9). Nevertheless, what God has revealed to us in His Word about heaven, makes earthly pleasures a fading and flickering match in comparison to the endless glory of the noonday sun.

2. All the miseries of this life will forever be removed. All sin (even those besetting sins), temptation to sin, desires to sin, all hurts, heartaches, fears, and loneliness will be swallowed up in the joy, peace, and contentment in the Lord. If we have the capacity to enjoy to some

degree (by God's grace) that which God has created in this world amidst all of the misery that surrounds us, what will be our capacity to enjoy the eternal glories of heaven (which far excels the fading glories of this earth) when all misery will be abolished? The capacity to enjoy the glories of heaven will know no limitations other than man's own finiteness.

3. Dear ones, I submit, we need more of a pilgrim perspective in regard to our earthly homes, our earthly relationships, and our earthly possessions. All that we see and have is a temporary lodging in a foreign land, for our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20). Why don't we rejoice more in what we suffer for the cause of Christ? I submit it is on the one hand that we have become so attached to this world (worldliness) that we cannot see beyond it to the unimaginable glories of heaven to come. Have we become so earthly minded, dear ones, that we of so little heavenly good (Hebrews 11:25-26)?

C. Note that the Lord Jesus calls heaven our "reward" ("Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven" Luke 6:23). The purpose of a reward is to motivate us to be earnest, faithful, and courageous in enduring the persecution that may come our way for the truth and righteousness of Christ.

1. Dear ones, it is not uncommon for us to work very hard when we know that there is a reward that awaits us. Children, you will ordinarily apply yourselves to your work more diligently, when you are promised a special privilege or reward for a job well done. Adults, you will spend extra time at work to get a project done when there is a bonus promised at the completion of the project. Likewise, our heavenly Father knows the encouragement that a reward also provides to His weak children who become discouraged over their besetting sins, who become afraid of persecution, who become weary of trials and afflictions, and who are tempted to seek the pleasures of this life in exchange for communion with Christ. That reward, which encompasses all that Christ

has prepared for those who have embraced Him by faith alone and who evidence that faith by their love and good deeds, is designated as everlasting life or as heaven.

2. Someone may ask, “If heaven is a reward, does that mean that heaven is earned due to our own merit?” Absolutely not.

a. If a child does precisely what his father commands him to do, the child by his obedience does not obligate the father to give him anything. For the child has only done that which was his duty to do (“Children obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right” Ephesians 6:1). The child can make no legitimate claim to a reward from his father. However, if the father freely chooses, out of his generosity and love, to bestow a reward upon his child in order to motivate him to a cheerful obedience, the father obligates himself (the child does not obligate him) to gladly grant the reward to the child for his cheerful and faithful obedience.

b. Likewise, the reward of heaven is not something the believer obligates God to pay, but something which God has obligated Himself (by His own gracious and sovereign will) to pay to believers in Jesus Christ (Luke 17:10). The merit that earned the reward is not the believer’s obedience, but Christ’s obedience. And yet the reward is offered as a righteous motivation to walk in loving obedience to Christ and His commandments and to suffer persecution for the cause of Christ. The Lord graciously works within us to will and to do His good pleasure (according to Philippians 2:13), and then He graciously rewards us for what He has accomplished in and through us. Now that is grace. It is important to keep in mind that we are not rewarded “on account of” or “because of” our works, but rather “according to” our works (as we see in Revelation 20:12).

D. Listen to the dying (yet joyful) testimony of some of Christ’s faithful witnesses who gave up their lives for the cause of Christ.

1. Among the last words of Rev. James Guthrie (Minister of Stirling and author of *Causes of the Lord's Wrath Against Scotland*), as he stood upon the scaffold before he was martyred and beheaded for the cause of Christ, were these:

I take God to record upon my soul, I would not exchange this scaffold with the palace or mitre of the greatest prelate in Britain. Blessed be God, who hath shown mercy to me such a wretch, and has revealed his Son in me Jesus Christ is my light and my life, my righteousness, my strength, and my salvation, and all my desire" (*The Scots Worthies*, John Howie, Still Waters Revival Books, p. 266).

2. Scottish covenanted preacher and martyr, Hugh M'Kail, is reported to have said as he climbed the ladder to be martyred for the crown and covenant of Jesus Christ:

I care no more to go up this ladder, and over it, than if I were going home to my father's house. . . . Friends and fellow-sufferers, be not afraid; every step of this ladder is a degree nearer heaven (*The Scots Worthies*, John Howie, Still Waters Revival Books, p. 363).

3. Scottish minister and faithful martyr for Christ, Donald Cargill, declared as climbing the scaffold:

The Lord knows I go on this ladder with less fear and perturbation [worry—GLP] of mind, than ever I entered the pulpit to preach. . . . Farewell, all relations and friends in Christ; farewell acquaintances and earthly enjoyment; farewell reading and preaching, praying and believing, wanderings, reproach, and sufferings. Welcome Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; into thy hands I commit my spirit (*The Scots Worthies*, John Howie, Still Waters Revival Books, p. 452).

4. The two Margarets, Margaret Wilson (18) and an elderly Margaret MacLauchlan, were both drowned in the Solway Firth at Wigtown (May 11, 1685) for attending conventicles [field meetings of Covenanters—GLP] and refusing to take the oath against the covenanted reformation. The soldiers tied them both to wooden stakes in the water. The younger Margaret was tied nearer to the shore, so that she would see the older woman die first and be persuaded to give up her beliefs. As

the older woman was drowning, the soldiers asked the younger Margaret what she thought of her now. Young Margaret Wilson replied “I see Christ wrestling there”. Then, just when she herself was about to drown, the soldiers lifted up her head and asked her to pray for the king. She answered, “God save him if he will, for it is his salvation I desire”. However, when they asked her to take the oath against the covenanted reformation, she said, “I will not, I am one of Christ’s children, let me go”. The soldiers then pushed her head down under the water again until she died. Just before she died, Margaret had sung from Psalm 25:7-9 (in the Scottish Metrical Psalter):

My sins and faults of youth
do thou, O Lord, forget:
After thy mercy think on me,
and for thy goodness great.

God good and upright is:
the way he'll sinners show.
The meek in judgment he will guide,
and make his path to know.”

<http://reformationhistory.org/twomargarets.html>

E. Dear ones, would not such a daily heavenly view of the joy of heaven be a great motive to you, as a child of God, in persevering with the joy of the Lord what persecution and trials may come your way for Christ, the pure gospel, the holy commandments, and our covenanted reformation?

1. Would not such a heavenly perspective of the joy of heaven be a great help to you in continuing to battle against your besetting sins (knowing all sin and temptation will be forever gone in heaven)? Would not the contemplation and meditation upon the final destruction of that awful cycle of sin bring great encouragement and perseverance to you as you cling to the certain hope of your heavenly

reward?

2. Would not the certain reward of heaven bring joy and comfort to you that the time of your physical suffering will be no longer be remembered in the presence of the resurrected Christ?

3. What about the many fears that plague your life: the fear of losing loved ones in death, the fear of your own death, the fear of suffering for your faith, the fear of man, or the fear of the unknown? Again taking the time to spend in glorious contemplation of heaven, where you will never ever have the slightest hint of these fears again, would that not replace the fears of this life with the joys of heaven? Dear ones, we do not fear what we will gain. Rather we fear what we will lose. And the reason we will never fear again in heaven is because all will be gain to us and nothing ever again will be lost to us.

4. What about the loneliness you face in this life? At times the loneliness is so overwhelming and painful that you do not want to go on living. Oh, dear one, the fellowship and communion in heaven will never be broken. No one there will ever be isolated from perfect fellowship with God, with the elect angels, or with the glorified saints (of all ages). Will not suffering a few years of loneliness here upon the earth (if God so ordains it) be worth the unbroken communion of God and the saints forever? Dear ones, let us daily remember, reflect, and meditate upon the joys of heaven. May God remove that tight grip upon the people and things of this life, that we might daily tightly grip Christ and the joy of heaven, that we might even now leap for joy in the midst of persecution/trials. Heaven is yours, all yours, through faith alone in Christ alone (1Timothy 1:15-16; Isaiah 55:1-2).

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