

Israel as a Christian Nation Removes False Religion #1

Zechariah 13:1-6; Romans 11:26

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In the last sermon, we began looking at the question: What is persecution? In summary, we concluded that persecution is the use of violence, or the use of compulsory power, or the use of the tongue in attacking those who faithfully stand for the righteousness and truth of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Holy Scriptures (Matthew 5:10,11; Job 19:22,28). Persecution is not (according to Christ, the prophets, and the apostles) the use of force against those who publicly profess and practice a false religion and lead others away from the true religion of Jesus Christ. Thus, when the civil magistrate will take up his rightful place in the glorious millennial age, as “the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil” (Romans 13:4), he will not be persecuting anyone who leads others into a false religion when he uses his compulsory power (i.e. the sword) to restrain such evil doers. “Evil doers” who ought to be restrained by the civil magistrate are identified by Paul and Jesus as those who lead others from the truth and righteousness of Christ as revealed in the Bible: Philippians 3:2; Revelation 2:2.

This, dear ones, is God’s definition of persecution contrary to the definition of religious tolerationists who generalize all force and restraint used by the civil magistrate against anyone for religious reasons as being persecution. Dear ones, we must in all such controversies decide where we will stand: with God or with the philosophers, clerics, politicians, and tolerationists of the present age? Once you take the step to define “persecution” biblically (and therefore correctly), you have taken a significant step in the direction of understanding the God-ordained role of the civil magistrate as “the minister of God to thee for good” (Romans 13:4).

But a fair question arises from this discussion of the nature of persecution: Is it persecution when others do not embrace some aspect of the truth of Christ (whether they profess to be Christians or not), but rather disagree with us and walk contrary to the truth in doctrine or life? Does their defending what is an error, or does there mere opposition to the truth and stating that to us mean that they are persecuting us? It seems to me that every error embraced does not a persecutor make. To embrace and profess unsound doctrine or idolatrous worship is certainly a sin and an error (no matter how well-intentioned one may be), but that by itself is not the nature of persecution. The Greek word for “persecution” is *diōkō*, and it has the root meaning of actively pursuing, chasing, or hunting someone. The classical usage of *diōkō* also was used in law to mean to prosecute, or to bring a lawsuit against someone. Thus, persecution at its root is taking aggressive action (whether in word or deed) against one who is standing for the Cause of Jesus Christ. Thus, even mockery, ridicule, or sarcasm directed against you for not celebrating pagan/popish holidays, like Christmas (because they are not holy days authorized by God and are instituted to promote idolatry), is persecution. Being intentionally passed over for a promotion at work because you will not work on the Lord’s Day is persecution. Unjust church censures brought against you for standing for the doctrine and worship found in Scripture is persecution. Being berated and excoriated because you believe in the absolute sovereignty of God, because you embrace the perpetual obligation of God’s Moral Law (all Ten of the Ten Commandments) upon the civil magistrate (and everyone else), or because you do not support a divorce for unbiblical grounds—each of these are forms of persecution for the sake of Jesus Christ. At some point, there is a crossing over the line **from** simply affirming that which is error **to** persecuting one who upholds the truth of Jesus Christ. There may be degrees of persecution that further aggravate the sin (e.g. moving from mere speech to overt violence), but the essence of persecution is evident when a Christian is attacked (whether verbally or bodily) for clinging to Christ and His Word.

Dear ones, you may be tempted only to think of persecution as that which the martyrs have suffered in laying down their lives for the truth and righteousness of Jesus Christ. But, beloved, we are reminded by the Holy Spirit that all who will live godly in Christ Jesus **shall suffer persecution** (2 Timothy 3:12). This brief peek into the nature of persecution should actually encourage you, dear Christian, because you may not have previously understood how you were suffering persecution for the sake of Christ and His truth, but now you may be able to rejoice that you have joined on various occasions the prophets, the apostles, and faithful Christians through the ages, and you have even joined Jesus Christ in being attacked (whether verbally or bodily) because you have loved Christ and His truth more than the applause and favor of men, and more than the comforts and possessions of this life. Jesus says, “Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad; for great is your reward in heaven” (Matthew 5:12).

Our main points from today’s text (as found in Zechariah 13:1-6) are the following: (1) The Temporal Context of this Fulfilled Prophecy (Zechariah 13:1,7); and (2) The Evident Fruit of a Christian Nation Revealed (Zechariah 13:2-6). We will not be able to finish our consideration of this text in one sermon and so we will continue our examination of this text in the next sermon as well.

I. The Temporal Context of this Fulfilled Prophecy (Zechariah 13:1,7).

A. The prophet Zechariah delivered the prophecies found in this book after a representative portion of the entire nation of Israel returned to their land from captivity in Babylon (by means of the decree of Cyrus in Ezra 1:1-4).

1. Once in their land, God’s people made a great start in laying the foundation of the Temple under the leadership of Ezra, Zerubbabel (the magistrate), and Joshua (the high priest), but soon found their hearts pulled away from the primary work of rebuilding the House of God to the secondary work of enlarging their own houses (as they increasingly used their time and resources to focus primarily on building bigger and more comfortable homes, Haggai 1). The House of God lay in ruins, the ordinances of the Church were incomplete, the ministry was not properly supported financially and maintained, and the people of God fell into apathy and indifference. Through the faithful preaching and prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1) and through the faithful service of Zerubbabel and Joshua, the Lord caused His people to cast aside all of their vain excuses for why they could not devote themselves to rebuilding His Temple and caused them rather to renew their National Covenant with the Lord on two different occasions (Ezra 10:3; Nehemiah 9:38). As a result, the Temple was rebuilt and completed with great rejoicing and praise to God for His faithfulness to them in remembering His Covenant (Ezra 6:14-15,20-21).

2. One means the Spirit of God used to encourage Israel not to cease their rebuilding the Temple (despite their small beginnings) was to give this small remnant the promise of a more glorious and blessed time in the future in which the Lord would fulfill His covenant promises to them—an age called the millennium (in Revelation 20) which would manifest national repentance, turning to the Lord Jesus Christ, and obedience to Christ’s gracious covenant with Israel. Dear ones, how we ever need the promises of God imprinted upon our minds and in our understanding, especially when we feel like giving up because we think the road we are on in our Christian life is just too difficult and bitter to take another step. Beloved, it is the love of God manifested in His promises and God’s faithfulness and power to keep His word that lifts us up and carries us through one trial and then through another trial until we finally face death and reflect back upon our lives and see how the Lord Jesus carried us in His loving arms each step of the way by means of His loving promises. These prophecies in Zechariah are filled with such glorious promises for the national restoration of Israel in the future and the bringing in of the fullness of the nations into the visible church of Jesus Christ.

B. As we seek to understand the temporal context of this fulfilled prophecy, let us note the first

words found in our English text in Zechariah 13:1: “And in that day.”

1. What day? Not a literal 24-hour day, but the day or time of Israel’s future restoration to Christ and deliverance from the impending destruction of her enemies (just as the Apostle John says in 1 John 2:18, “it is the last time”, literally, “it is the last hour”). For in Zechariah 12, we see a number of significant events involving a wicked coalition of nations that will conspire to attack Israel in “that day”, but the Lord will graciously grant the nation of Israel His miraculous deliverance as national Israel turns in faith to Jesus Christ and repents of her sin and rebellion (cp. “that day” in Zechariah 12:3,4,6,8, and especially in verses 9-13 where it is clear that Israel as a nation will turn in faith and repentance to Jesus Christ whom they pierced). This national salvation of Israel in Zechariah 12:10-13 points to the same event as described by the Apostle Paul in Romans 11:26, “And so all Israel shall be saved.” Israel will become a Christian nation as she faces imminent destruction from the forces of the papal antichrist at the battle of Armageddon (Revelation 16:13-16). Thus, when Zechariah 13:1 begins with the words, “And in that day”, let us be clear that the “day” or time in view is in the present New Covenant age of Jesus Christ and yet future to us in its complete fulfillment. For Israel as a nation has not yet faced these three prophesied events within the same period of time: (1) a coalition of nations besieging her; (2) a national repentance and turning in faith to Jesus Christ; and as a result of her turning to Christ, (3) a miraculous national deliverance from imminent destruction. This prophecy must yet be future to us. In fact, it is one of the key events that will introduce the world to the millennial reign of Jesus Christ over the earth from His heavenly throne.

2. And now we go to Zechariah 13:7, and note that this prophecy also relates to the New Covenant age of Jesus Christ, “Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones” (cp. Matthew 26:31). Thus, clearly the prophecy we find in Zechariah 13:2-6 speaks of Israel as a Christian nation that has turned to Jesus Christ in faith and repentance, and the fruit of her national salvation that she will reveal in her disposition toward idolaters and false teachers at that future time.

II. The Evident Fruit of a Christian Nation Revealed (Zechariah 13:2-6).

A. During this time of national salvation for Israel (wherein she renews her ancient covenant with the Lord) and of worldwide salvation for the nations (wherein they too are joined to the Lord in national covenants as we see in Zechariah 2:11), here we see the manifest fruit exhibited in the civil realm of Israel as a Christian nation. The text focuses on how the Christian nation of Israel will deal with those who practice idolatry and those who are false prophets (but the Christian nation of Israel will be representative of how all Christian nations will deal with idolatry and false religion at that time). And before looking briefly at the restraint and punishment of those guilty of these religious sins against God and crimes against the state, carefully note that what is prophesied here also occurs in the same temporal context of that millennial age which was explained earlier in the sermon. For Zechariah 13:2 begins, “And it shall come to pass IN THAT DAY, saith the LORD of hosts” (i.e. the same say day or time period referred to in Zechariah 12, note particularly verses 9-14); and likewise Zechariah 13:4 begins, “And it shall come to pass IN THAT DAY.” In other words, Zechariah 13:2-6 is temporally connected to the national conversion of Israel to Jesus Christ, and her subsequent national deliverance from her enemies by the consistent use of that temporal phrase in both chapters 12 and 13: “IN THAT DAY.” Here then is a prophecy of what a Christian nation should do even now (if it is indeed a Christian nation), and what Christian nations (like Israel) shall do at the time of the millennial age in regard to idolaters and false prophets. Will Christian nations allow idolaters and false prophets to practice their false religions as a “God-given right of conscience”? Or will Christian nations understand that God has not given any such rights to anyone to profane His name, His Christ, His religion, or His Moral Law, and in obedience to God seek to restrain such abominations that bring God’s judgment upon nations?

B. Let us first consider the restraint of idolatry by Israel as a Christian nation at the time of this glorious millennial reformation: “And it shall come to pass in that day, saith the LORD of hosts, that I will cut off the names of the idols out of the land, and they shall no more be remembered” Zechariah 13:2a.

1. Here the Lord prophesies through Zechariah that in that day God will not only cut off idolatry, but will “cut off” the very names of the idols out of the land (in other words, the very memory of the idols of false religion will be cut off due to the glorious reformation of religion in the Christian nation of Israel). To “cut off” may be used in an ecclesiastical sense to mean to excommunicate or separate one from the holy ordinances of the Lord and from the Lord’s people for a sin committed (as in Genesis 17:14; Exodus 12:19), or it may also be used in a civil sense, meaning to physically cut one off by death for some crime committed (as in Leviticus 20:2-3,6 [compare v. 6 with v. 27],17; Numbers 15:31-36 [compare with Deuteronomy 17:12]). The fact that the names of the idols are cut off “**out of the land**” (i.e. cut off from the geo-political boundaries of the Christian nation of Israel and not only cut off from the congregation of God’s people and church) would indicate that at that time idolatry will no longer be tolerated or viewed as a “civil right” of religious liberty within the Christian nation of Israel, but rather will be restrained and punished by the sword of the civil magistrate (as the minister of God to thee for good in avenging God’s wrath against those who practice such evil, Romans 13:4).

a. Idolatry according to God’s commandments is serving other gods (rather than the Triune God of the Bible) by way of a false religion, such as Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Mormonism (which is a violation of the First Commandment in Exodus 20:3); but idolatry is also manifested in professing to serve the Triune God of the Bible by way of worship which He has not authorized in His Word, such as the use of images in worship, the use of hymns rather than psalms in worship, the use of religious holy days not appointed in His Word like Christmas and Easter in worship, (which are also violations of the Second Commandment in Exodus 20:4-6).

b. And nowhere in this prophecy will you find that such a cutting off of false religion and those who practice it is called “persecution” or is said to deny the civil or religious rights of people. To the contrary, this is something that the holy and just God says He will accomplish Himself, even if He uses the Gospel of Christ in changing the hearts of men, women, and children, and uses the Divine ordinances of the family, the church, and the state as means to bring about such a glorious reformation; it is still the Lord that brings this all to pass (“I will cut off”).

c. Dear ones, there is coming a time in this world’s history when the Triune God, when Christ, when biblical reformed Christianity, and when God’s Moral Law will not be simply tolerated as one God and religion among many for people to choose from, but will be that God and religion alone that is established in Christian nations (like the future Israel) and defended by Christian magistrates (as God’s ministers for good).

2. But the prophecy of Zechariah continues by noting that at the future time of millennial reformation, our Triune God will also “cause the prophets [i.e. the false prophets—GLP] and the unclean spirit to pass out of the land” (Zechariah 13:2b). Once again notice that the Lord God will not only cause the false prophets and the unclean spirit to pass out of the Visible Church of Jesus Christ, but will also cause the false prophets and the unclean spirit to pass “out of the land” (i.e. out of the geo-political boundaries of the Christian nation of Israel). Just as idolatry, false religion, and corrupt worship will be cut off from “the land” of that Christian nation of Israel, so also will heresy and unsound doctrine that is uttered by false prophets and false teachers pass out of “the land” of that Christian nation of Israel.

a. It is clear from the rest of the passage that “the prophets” mentioned in Zechariah 13:2b are false prophets and false teachers (cp. Zechariah 13:3, “thou speakest lies in the name of the LORD”; and Zechariah 13:4, “neither shall they wear a rough garment to deceive”). And do not miss this wonderful truth: God will cause “the unclean spirit” to pass out of the land. I submit “the unclean spirit” (who is a lying spirit in the mouth of false prophets and false teachers) is Satan himself (2 Corinthians 11:13-16).

b. Dear ones, Satan will be restrained during the millennial reign of Christ from His throne in heaven so that he is no longer able to deceive the nations of the world by his superstitions and heresies that have blinded so many in the present age (Revelation 20:1-3). What a blessed day that will be for the church and the nations of this world! This is from beginning to end the work of the Lord in supernaturally restraining Satan during the millennial reformation and in restraining false prophets and false teachers by means of faithful Christian families, by means of faithful church courts, but also by means of faithful civil courts (for idolatry, heresy, and blasphemy will be removed “out of the land”).

Let me make two closing observations from our text in regard to our discussion of persecution.

1. Before a nation can ever realize the biblical justice addressed in our text, that nation and its leaders must first be brought to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit and the gospel of Jesus Christ (just as we have seen in this prophecy that Israel as a nation will first come to Christ in faith and repent of her national sins against the Triune God before idolatry, heresy, and blasphemy are removed from the land). It is the moral duty of nations and their civil magistrates to restrain and punish idolatry, heresy, and blasphemy because God’s Moral Law requires it. However, that will not occur within a nation without such a work of the Lord as is prophesied here to occur when Israel becomes a Christian nation. It is likewise a moral duty for all individuals and all families to restrain idolatry, heresy, and blasphemy within their own lives and within their families, but that will not occur without the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit and the gospel of Jesus Christ. The same is true of the moral person of a nation. National reformation in Israel in the Old Testament and national reformation within nations of the First and Second Reformations were preceded by the work of the Holy Spirit in drawing significant portions of the people and the civil magistrates to Christ through the preaching of the gospel. Reformation in church and state cannot be forced at the end of a gun upon an entire nation that is not willing. That is the way of the Islamic jihad and the way of the Catholic persecution in Europe, but it is not the way of Christ in bringing reformation to church and state. According to the words of the psalmist in addressing the glories of Christ’s mediatorial reign from heaven over the nations of the world, it is said, “Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power” (Psalm 110:3). Reformation may be relatively swift or it may be slower and more gradual in coming, but come it must and come it will. Thus, we do not promote a jihad or a crusade in bringing biblical reformation to the civil government of a nation. We promote the gospel of Jesus Christ as the agent of change used by God to bring about a Christian nation, and the Moral Law of God as the agent for restraint against idolatry, heresy, and blasphemy within a Christian.

2. It is not a wicked persecution to cut off and remove idolatry, heresy, and blasphemy from “the land”. It is, in fact, the work of the Lord to do so according to our text (“I will cut off” and “I will cause”). For the Lord uses as means to “cut off” and to remove these religious crimes the Divine ordinance of civil government and the civil magistrate (who is the minister of God to thee for good, a revenger to execute God’s righteous wrath upon those that do evil according to Romans 13:4). For, dear ones, idolatry, heresy, and blasphemy are evils in their very nature because they are contrary to God’s righteousness found in His Moral Law, but they are also evils because they bring God’s wrath upon a nation, and they are evils because they lead others from Christ (the Way, the Truth, and the Life) and into hell. The civil magistrate certainly cannot change a person’s heart by any law he enforces (whether a law against murder or a law against idolatry), but he can outwardly restrain that evil so that it is not rampant and widespread in bringing God’s judgment upon a nation and in leading many to destruction. Dear ones, if God Himself accomplishes the cutting off of idolatry, heresy, and blasphemy from the land in part by means of His Divine ordinance of civil government, this cannot be persecution, unless we desire to blasphemously attribute persecution to our sovereign and holy God.

Dear ones, take hope in the promises of God. Lean not unto your own understanding, your own wisdom, or

your own resources. For God uses His promises as the means to stir up our faith in His power, wisdom, and faithfulness. Dear ones, if you have received His promise of life through faith in Jesus Christ, then all the promises of God are to you Yea and Amen through Jesus Christ who has already secured by His death and resurrection every promise of God for His people. The promises of God are yours, dear ones. You are rich in Christ. Cling to those promises in life and death. You will never be disappointed or regret that you held firmly to the promises of God in the face of every wind and storm.

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