

Persecution For Christ's Sake.

Text: John 15:16-16:4

Suggested Hymns:

113, 373, 133, 227, 392

1) True Christians Must Suffer Persecution

2) Why True Christians Are Persecuted.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is John 15:26–16:4, ²⁶ ***“But when the [Comforter] comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. ²⁷ And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning.***

¹ ***“These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble. ² They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. ³ And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me. ⁴ But these things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them. And these things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you.”*** (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

By the first words of our Gospel our attention is directed to the great festival which we will celebrate next Sunday, the festival of Pentecost. For when Jesus says, ***“But when the [Comforter] comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me,”*** He refers to the wonderful effusion of the Holy Spirit, who on the day of Pentecost came down upon the disciples as they were assembled in Jerusalem.

He rested upon their heads in the shape of divided tongues as of fire, and filled their hearts, and enabled them to proclaim the great works of God, done for the salvation of man, in all the languages of the world.

But why did Jesus have the Holy Spirit come upon His disciples in such special manner and handed them over, as it were, to the Holy Spirit, would place them in charge after His ascension into heaven?

We have heard that in the Gospel of Sunday before last,¹ where Christ says,¹² *“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.”*¹³ *However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come.*¹⁴ *He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.*

Behold, this is what the Holy Spirit was to do and what He did in the disciples. He was to testify of Christ, He was to endow them with a perfect understanding of Christ and His great work of redemption. He was to tell them all those things which, on account of their weakness, they could not bear while Jesus was with them.

However, Jesus says to His disciples, ‘You must not think that testifying of me, bearing witness of me, is an exclusive work of the Holy Spirit.’ No, Jesus says in our text²⁷ *And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning.*

And hereupon He discloses to them a part of their future life. He tells them how they would be hated and persecuted by the world for bearing witness of their divine Lord and Master.

Let us therefore consider with the help of God’s Holy Spirit, *Persecution For Christ’s Sake*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. True Christians Must Suffer Persecution

Jesus says to His disciples, *“² They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service.”*³ *And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me.”*

In the most distinct terms Jesus here predicts persecution to come upon His disciples. And the same prediction He made at different times and occasions. Shortly before our text He says in John 15:18, 20,¹⁸ *“If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. ...”*²⁰ *Remember the word that I said*

to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.

In Matthew 10:16, 18 Jesus says to His disciples, ¹⁶ *"Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. ... they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. ¹⁸ You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles.*

Upon the disciples these predictions came true to the letter. The history of the apostles, as put down by St. Luke in the book of the Acts, contains an account of the persecutions which the disciples had to suffer at the hands of Jews and Gentiles; and the books of the early history of the Christian church are a supplement to that account.

These brave witnesses of the Lord Jesus were beaten, scourged, cast into prison, placed in the stocks, stoned, tortured, killed. Stephen proclaims Jesus and is stoned to death. No sooner is Saul, the honoured and distinguished Pharisee, converted to Christ than he is cast out of the synagogue. He is intensely hated by his former friends, bitterly persecuted, and finally, after enduring countless hardships, he is beheaded in the city of Rome.

James is cast down from the pinnacle of the temple and killed. Each and every one of the apostles met with a violent death, except John who died a natural death.²

We must not, however, think that Christ's prediction was meant for the disciples only. It was meant for all true Christians. All true Christians must expect to be hated and persecuted by the world. Jesus expressly says in Luke 9:23-24, *"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. ²⁴ For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it.*

And it is of all His followers that Jesus says in Matthew 10:22, ²² *And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.*

And St. Paul distinctly says in 2 Timothy 3:12, ¹² *Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.*

If we glance over the history of the Christian church we will find that it is the history of constant persecutions, which the believers in Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, had to suffer, persecutions inflicted upon them by the unbelieving world.

The greater the zeal with which true Christians were inspired at any period of time, the more fiercely and cruelly they were persecuted. Especially the first three centuries of the Christian era are marked by persecutions so cruel, so sickening, as to make the blood curdle when you think of it.

Not only were the Christians apprehended and cast into the dungeons, they were also put to death in the most shocking manner intended to frighten the other Christians that they should deny Christ, renounce Christianity, and turn to heathen practices.

They were crucified head downward, scalded with boiling oil, cast before the wild beasts in the arena, or slain with the sword. And why were the heathen so eager to shed the blood of Christians?

It was, as Christ says, that by killing the Christians they thought they were doing God service. Christians were held responsible for every calamity. Did a drought occur, the common explanation was that, if God refused rain, the Christians were at fault.

Did the Nile refuse its annual irrigation, or the Tiber overflow its banks, did an earthquake or famine or any other calamity excite the popular mind, a ready cause was in every mouth: The anger of the gods on account of the increase of Christianity, and a ready sacrifice to appease the offended deities was immediately resorted to, the slaughter of the Christians.

Such were the dealings with Christians in the early times of the Christian church. And how were the true Christians treated in the time of the Reformation, five hundred years ago? Think of the horrors of the inquisition and all those instruments of torture that were invented under the papal rule to stamp out the Protestant heresy, as it was called.

Think of the poor Waldenses, who dissented from the doctrines of the papacy prior to the Reformation, and who had to hide in the mountains that they might escape extermination at the hands of Rome's blood-thirsty executioners.

Think of Luther, whose life was continually at stake, and whom his friends had to hide for a time that he might escape the fate of John Huss. Think of the Huguenots in France, how they were massacred in cold blood.

And do true Christians suffer persecution to this day? Truly, the blood of martyrs is still flowing, and though this age boasts of being an age of progress thousands upon thousands of Christians are massacred in the world, and nothing is being done by the worldly powers to stop it.

The website *opendoors.org.au* shows that many Christians in the world are persecuted today. It has a watchlist of the 50 most dangerous countries to live in as a Christian.

If you are a true Christian, if you profess the faith, depend on it that you will have to suffer for it in some way. The world will hate you. Your best friends might desert you. Your own relatives, if they still cling to the world, will be against you. You will have to suffer persecution and endure the hatred, the scorn and ridicule, the antagonism, the malice of the evil world for the sake of Jesus whom you profess before them.

2. Why True Christians Are Persecuted

And now let us see why Christians are being persecuted. Men have often been offended in these persecutions which Christians must suffer. It has been said, “*Why does God not protect those whom He loves? If He is the Ruler over all, if He is almighty, if He can turn the hearts of men, why does He not turn the hearts of those who thirst after the blood of His children and halt their murderous hands?*”

To all questions of this kind we find a reply in our Gospel. Jesus says, “*1* ***These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble*** [or be offended],” and again He says, “*4* ***But these things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them.***”

Jesus is telling us not to stumble or be offended when you see persecutions coming. Remember, I told you that they will come and must come, and rest contented in that. Do not endeavour to pry into secrets which have not been revealed, or to fathom depths which you will never reach with the line of human understanding.

Why God, who is and ever remains a divine Protector of all who trust in Him, will permit dire persecutions to come upon those whom He loves, why He will hinder the hand of the persecutor in one land, but not in another, why He will let scores of years roll on without any notable persecution, and then let persecutions come in full force, why He will let one Christian suffer more, but another less — these are mysteries which human reason will never solve.

And because the faith of a Christian receives a severe shock when he must encounter persecutions, Jesus says, *“Do not stumble, do not be offended. Remember, I told you that it would come; know that I have not deserted you. I still love you. Keep the faith and endure to the end, and you shall be saved.”*

Our divine Lord also states the true reason why the children of this world persecute His dear Christians. He says, *“³ And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me.”* These words almost sound as if Jesus intended thereby to excuse the children of this world for persecuting the Christians, as if He would say, *‘They are not so much to blame, they are ignorant, they know no better.’*

But this is not the case. For to know the Father and to know Christ, in the language of the Scriptures, is the same thing as believing in and loving the Father and His Son Jesus. Not to know the Father and Jesus is, therefore, the same thing as not to believe in, not to love, but to hate and to reject the true God and His beloved Son.

So the reason why the children of this world persecute the Christians is not simply because they did not know any better and, therefore, were not to be held so much accountable for their wickedness, but because they are opposed to the true God and His beloved Son Jesus Christ, because they hate Him, and instead of loving God love themselves, love sin, love the pleasures of this life and the honour and vain glory of this world.

And they cannot display their hatred against God in any other way than by abusing, harassing, ill-treating, and persecuting those who truly believe in Him.

In the Christians they actually persecute God and the Lord Jesus. When, therefore, Saul, on his way to Damascus to persecute the Christians, was thrown to the ground and heard the voice from heaven saying, *“Saul, Saul, why are you*

persecuting Me?” and said, “Who are You, Lord?” the answer came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”³

The children of this world cannot bear to see the Christians walking the narrow way that leads to eternal life, shunning the world’s evil lusts, and keeping themselves from sin; for this conduct of Christians reminds them continually of their wickedness and silently condemns their evil actions.

They cannot bear to hear Christians speaking of Jesus the Saviour and saying that though they are sinners the blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, which was shed for all men on the cross, has cleansed them from all their sins; for this declaration condemns them and implies that those who refuse to believe in Christ shall be eternally lost because they do not believe in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

May the Lord, then, uphold us all in the persecutions which we must endure for His name’s sake, and ours shall be the promise written in Matthew 5:11–12,
¹¹ *“Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹² Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven.”* Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ John 16:12–14

² The People’s Bible, Matthew P147

³ Acts 9:5