

Rev. Janet Doyle  
Elmer Presbyterian Church  
November 7, 2021  
Scripture: John 15: 18-25

## **Sermon: Standing Strong**

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (*Matthew 5: 10-12*)

Today we are remembering the persecuted church around the world. It is something we rarely think about in the United States. Talking about persecution is a difficult topic and it can make us feel uncomfortable. The persecuted church around the world doesn't get the kind of exposure that it needs. Our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world face many brutal hardships that are rarely brought to light.

Every Sunday, Christians in North America normally gather for worship. We come knowing we are free to gather in our fellowship. Yet, around the world, it's estimated that nearly 322 Christians die each month simply because they believe in Jesus. That's nearly eleven every day.

Persecution is now truly global. Christians are being persecuted all over Africa, the Middle East, in much of Asia, in several Pacific Island nations, and in Central and South America.

“The focus of the Christian missions community 200 years ago was for the coastlands of the world. A century later, the success of the coastland's effort motivated a new generation to reach the interior regions of the continents. Within the past several decades, the success of the inland thrust has led to a major focus on people groups. Today, followers of Christ are concentrating their efforts on the unreached peoples of the world, most of which are in the 10/40 Window.”

The 10/40 Window is the rectangular area of North Africa, the Middle East and Asia approximately between 10 degrees north and 40 degrees north latitude. The 10/40 Window is often called "The Resistant Belt" and includes the majority of the world's Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. The original 10/40 Window included only countries with at least 50% of their land

mass within 10- and 40-degrees north latitude. The revised 10/40 Window includes several additional countries that are close to 10- or 40-degrees north latitude and have high concentrations of unreached peoples.” (<https://joshuaproject.net/help/terms>)

Persecution and suffering is one of the themes that runs as an undercurrent throughout the Bible. The word “persecution” occurs 45 times in the New Testament in one form or another. Entire books of the New Testament were written to those being persecuted: Hebrews, Philippians, and 1 Peter among them. Many of Paul’s letters were written from prison, where he was confined because of his gospel preaching: Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. John received the Revelation while banished to Patmos, essentially an island prison colony.

It is also important to remember that many of the most prominent Christians in the early church suffered great persecution and martyrdom. Stephen, the deacon, was the first, followed by James, the brother of John.

When we carefully read the scriptures, it becomes clear that persecution is not unusual for the church. Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:12, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

God even prophesied that his prophets and servants would be persecuted (*Luke 11: 48-50*). Jesus said a similar prophecy in Luke 21:12 regarding his followers. Jesus plainly taught that those He sends out with the message of the gospel can expect persecution (*Matthew 10 16-26*).

In 1 Peter 4:12, Peter taught believers to expect persecution: “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”

We shouldn’t be surprised if we are persecuted, for even Jesus himself was persecuted by those who opposed Him. Jesus often spoke of his experience of suffering, abuse and rejections.

And if our Lord was persecuted, can we expect to escape persecution? No. We can’t.

In our scripture lesson today from John 15:20 it says, “No servant is greater than his master. ‘If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.’”

Persecution often results from the proclamation of the word of God. Persecution of believers may also come because of their identification with the person of Christ Himself. Jesus told the disciples that people would hate them simply because they belonged to him.

Matthew 24:9 states, “Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death and you will be hated by all nations because of me.”

The Bible teaches that Christians are persecuted because we are not of this world. Our values, behavior, thinking, perspectives, and lifestyle all mark us as different.

John 15: 18-19 of our lesson today Jesus said, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own, but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”

Christians around the world suffer mistreatment of their faith. This can range from discrimination and prejudicial attitudes to oppression and violence, even death. Whether a Christian faces imprisonment and death, or slander and bigotry, how should we respond?

God uses persecution as a testimony to the power of the gospel message. The word “martyr” actually means “witness.” Those who suffered and died for their faith are powerful testimonies for the gospel.

As our scripture lesson tells us, we are citizens of a different realm. Persecution teaches us that our life does not consist of the things of this world especially, especially not its comforts.

In Romans 8:18 the Apostle Paul said, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

In Matthew 5:44 Jesus taught us that when persecuted, we should love our enemies, and pray for those who are persecuting us.

Persecution is not punishment. On the contrary, to suffer for Christ can be thought of as an honor that God bestows on His people. (*Acts 5:41*). The Apostle Paul tells us that persecution cannot separate us from the love of Christ. (*Romans 8:35*) God is with us in the midst of the persecution.

God's grace is completely sufficient, even in hardship, even in persecution.

It is hard to believe, but persecution often unites the church and brings more people to believe in the love and forgiveness of Jesus. Those who suffer together, come together to console, encourage and strengthen one another.

Hebrews 13:3 says, "Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering."

Suffering can allow the believer to enter into an intimate fellowship with the Lord, who Himself suffered for us. Persecution serves as a witness to the gospel because believers are willing to suffer and yes even die for their faith. It serves as a powerful demonstration of Christ's presence in their lives.

Paul, speaks of what he endured for the Lord. He says, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." (*2 Corinthians 4:8-10*)

There is a blessing for those who are persecuted for belief in Jesus Christ. Persecution and suffering can be instrumental in bringing glory to God and to share in his glory.

Let us pray for those who are standing strong in their faith in the midst of persecution and thank God for those who have died standing strong in their faith and belief in Jesus Christ.

Jemal despised followers of Jesus Christ. Growing up as a devout Muslim in Ethiopia he debated Christians and pointed out what he considered biblical fallacies. Jemal would debate a former Muslim named Yonas. Over time, Yonas's answers began to make sense to Jemal. He began comparing the Quran and the Bible and gradually started to love the Bible. When he turned twenty, he decided to place his faith in Christ. Eventually, Jemal's family began to notice changes in his character and his father asked him if he was a Christian. Jemal replied, "I am."

With their father's approval, Jemal's brothers and some other men from the village beat and tortured Jemal in an attempt to persuade him to return to Islam. But Jemal's love for Jesus, which had been growing for years, sustained him through the persecution.

"I would rather die than deny Jesus," he told his brothers.

Realizing his son wasn't going to return to Islam, Jemal's father called off the beatings. He told Jemal that he wanted to kill him but didn't want to be arrested for it. So instead, he ordered Jemal's brothers to gather his possessions and burn them. Then he told Jemal he never wanted to see him again.

Jemal entered a training program for Christian converts from Islam and soon began full-time ministry work. After completing his training, Jemal got married. In 2017, Jemal's father sent a mob of young radical Muslims to hunt him down and kill him. The mob was unable to find Jemal and his wife, but they burned his house to the ground.

Although Jemal lost his family, home, land and belongings, he said Jesus is worth it. And he said he hopes God will use his new life for His glory.

"The first thing that I've got is eternal life," Jemal said. "Even now, if they are coming to kill me, to behead me, I'll give myself for the sake of Christ. If Muslims, after they saw that I was beheaded for the sake of Christ—believe through that, it is worth it to give my life to Christ." (*Voice of the Martyrs Vol November 2021*)

In India, Bindi met and married Kande, a Christian. Bindi recalled, "He helped lead me to accept Jesus as my Savior." They lived in a village where they were the first and only Christians in the Hindu community.

Kande was asked by local leaders to publicly renounce his Christian faith at a community meeting. Kande gave a thorough explanation of his decision to follow Christ and said he could not reject Him. Each time Bindi and Kande faced persecution, they prayed for strength to endure the attack. Even Bindi's mother was attacked one night when a group of young men barged into their home. The violence didn't end. The family continued to receive threats for refusing to renounce their faith and on the evening of June 7, 2020, Kande got a phone call threatening to kill

him. Then, at about p.m. that evening, a loud knock came at their door. When Kande looked outside, he saw a group of armed men. “If God is willing to take away my life, it is His will.” Kande told Bindi, “If God wants to save me, He will save me. No matter what happens to me, you should not give up your faith in Jesus. In difficulties, you must continue to follow Jesus. Our Lord is able to provide for you even if my life is taken away.”

Moments later, one of the men broke down the door and dragged Kande out of the house. The next morning Kande’s body was found on the side of the road leading to his church. Bindi said she has learned more about God’s faithfulness and purposes since Kande’s death. “God has provided what I need,” she said. “God is teaching me to remain strong so I can make other women strong.”

Bindi remembers her husband saying once, “I will live for Jesus or die for Jesus, but I will never turn back.” (*Voice of the Martyrs Vol June 2021*)

These are just two stories of those who have been persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ.

The gospel goes forth in a cross-shaped vehicle, one that is shaped by suffering and death but also victory and glory.

Let us all stand strong in our faith and pray for each other to walk by faith; trusting in the Lord with all our heart and lean not unto our own understanding but acknowledging Him and He will make our paths straight.

Let us now pray for those facing persecution to stand strong.