

- I. Perseverance in Persecution; Sunday, August 17, 2014  
(Sunnyslope)

Psalm 19:14

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be  
pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

- A. "Good morning, church!"
- B. It's so very good to be back after so long of an absence
1. Three weeks ago, late Sunday evening, Sharalyn drove me to the airport, and I boarded an airplane bound for the other side of the planet
  2. The destination was the country of Malaysia, to a satellite city of Kuala Lumpur called Cyberjaya
- C. Malaysia is an interesting place, although not necessarily a place I would want to visit for a vacation
1. It's close to the equator, so it's in perpetual summer
    - a) There are no seasons
    - b) It's nearly always 95 degrees with 95% humidity
  2. The mix of cultures makes for some strange and extreme food options
  3. Although highly developed, it's still a developing country outside the major cities
    - a) So often there would be thick layers of smog in the air
    - b) These would come in from farmers far outside the city who would be burning underbrush to make fertilizer

4. Speaking of the countryside, it still has a great deal of remote areas
    - a) One Saturday, a group of us went hiking through the Malaysian tropical jungle
    - b) It was extremely hot and humid, but it was fairly pretty
  5. The country is predominately Islamic, with 62% of the population professing to be Muslim
    - a) There are also groups of Buddhists, Taoists, and Hindus
    - b) And there are a few Christians here and there
- D. Despite being an Islamic country, Malaysia is generally fairly tolerant of non-Muslim religions
1. However, it's illegal to witness or otherwise share Christianity with a Malaysian Muslim
  2. And in fact, it's illegal (by law) for a Malaysian Muslim to leave Islam
  3. Malaysian Muslims are not allowed to legally convert to other religions and are forced into "rehabilitation camps" if they attempt to
  4. All ethnic Malaysians are legally expected to be Muslim
  5. The government prohibits any publications it feels will incite religious disharmony, meaning most Christians publications are prohibited
  6. The government has the power legally to demolish what it calls "unregistered" religious places of worship
- E. Christianity has become restricted as Malaysia has become more Islamic

1. Restrictions have been placed on the construction of new churches, although existing ones are usually allowed to continue to operate
  2. Some cities have prohibited any new churches to be built
  3. Bibles translated into the native language of Malay are prohibited by law
- F. Try to imagine those sorts of restrictions in the United States
- G. And I would like for us to consider that Malaysia is considered a relatively religiously tolerant country by comparison to other Islamic countries
- II. Christianity outside the United States and a few other western countries is under increasing levels of persecution
- A. Recently, the Prime Minister of Britain, David Cameron, made the eye-catching suggestion that Christians were the most persecuted religious group in the world today
- B. The PM is not the first prominent figure to make such a claim
1. Pope Benedict said it during his New Year message in 2011
  2. Angela Merkel made similar remarks during a visit to a church in November 2012
  3. And Prince Charles spoke of "intimidation, false accusation and organised persecution to the Christian communities in the Middle East at the present time."
- C. Tragic news reports seem to bear this out
1. There's the destruction of ancient Christian communities in their homelands in Iraq, Syria and other parts of the Middle East, described by Tom Holland as "a crime against civilization as well as against humanity"

2. We hear reports almost daily now of Christians across Syria and Iraq being murdered en masse for refusing to convert to Islam
  3. And let's not forget North Korea, officially the worst country in the world to be a Christian...
    - a) ...where recently 33 Baptist missionaries were said to have been sentenced to death on the personal orders of Kim Jong-Un
    - b) ...and where an American Christian pastor remain in jail even to this day
- D. The persecution of Christians has been the subject of some recent books
1. The US Catholic journalist John Allen entitled his *The Global War on Christians*, maintaining that Christians as a whole were "indisputably the most persecuted religious body on the planet"
  2. Writing in the *Spectator*, Allen commented that:

The world is witnessing the rise of an entire new generation of Christian martyrs. The carnage is occurring on such a vast scale that it represents not only the most dramatic Christian story of our time, but arguably the premier human rights challenge of this era as well.
  3. British author Rupert Shortt in his recent book *Christianophobia: A faith under attack* catalogues violent targeting of Christians from Nigeria to the far-east as well as less lethal but clear human rights abuses and intimidation
    - a) In an interview with Alan Johnson, Shortt said that "in a vast belt of land from Morocco to Pakistan there is scarcely a single country in which Christians can worship entirely without harassment".

- b) In the same interview, Shortt also lamented the existence of a mainstream societal "blind spot" which, he suggested, made western politicians over-cautious when it came to the persecution of Christians abroad, especially in majority Muslim countries, while at the same time being "very very sensitized to the perceived sufferings and complaints of Muslims"
  - c) We can see some evidence of this blind spot even now when we compare the level, depth, and number of news reports about a few hundred Muslims killed in Gaza compared to the reports (or in most cases the absence of reports) about the tens of thousands killed in Syria and northern Iraq
- E. Even more rigorous data has been assembled by the Pew Research Forum in a report produced recently
- 1. Pew found that official "restriction on religion" (a more objective term than "persecution") was at the highest level for six years, as was the "social harassment" of members of religious communities
  - 2. And Christians, indeed, were the most affected group
  - 3. Christians faced harassment in no fewer than 151 countries worldwide - and not just in the Middle East, China, or North Korea
- F. Now this is all rather extreme compared to what you might call "light weight" persecution of Christians in the United States today
- 1. But we shouldn't forget the changing attitudes towards Christianity in our home country
  - 2. It's becoming increasingly less popular to be openly Christian today

3. And we should remember that with the growing numbers of secularists in mainstream society there will come increasing Christian persecution

III. This could all seem to us rather disheartening and troubling, and while this data is true and something we should pray against, I would like to propose that this data is what we should expect, and in fact, we should as a result of it rejoice

A. I know, that sounds insane; why would we rejoice, be glad, and take delight in being persecuted?

1. Well, the Bible tells us we should expect persecution if we are following the Gospel
2. And so if Christianity worldwide experiences persecution, it's a sign that suggests we're following the Gospel

2 Timothy 3:12

In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

1 John 3:13

Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you.

John 15:19

If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.

Proverbs 29:27

The righteous detest the dishonest; the wicked detest the upright.

1 Peter 4:12-14

<sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

<sup>14</sup>If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

B. And we are given many verses of comfort for times when we are persecuted

1. Remember, of course, that we are blessed when persecuted

Luke 6:22

Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

2. Christ Himself tells us that He was persecuted first and therefore suffers with us in our persecution; we are not alone

John 15:18

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.

3. When we remember Christ's suffering and persecution, we have in that a source of hope

Hebrews 12:3

Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

C. So we know then that when we follow the Gospel, we will have to endure some form of persecution

D. And we can take great comfort in knowing that we are not alone, that we suffer with our fellow Christians, and not only that but also we suffer in fellowship with Jesus Christ Himself

E. But then what should be our response to persecution? How should we act? What should we do?

1. Firstly, we need to ensure we do not fall into fear of persecution; we should not be afraid of what persecution we will face

Revelation 2:10

Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown.

2. Second, we should never consider the option of “getting even” or somehow seeking revenge, retribution, or retaliation for any persecution of our faith or of ourselves due to our faith

Romans 12:17-21

<sup>17</sup>Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. <sup>18</sup>If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. <sup>19</sup>Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. <sup>20</sup>On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”

<sup>21</sup>Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

3. Related to this but taking it a step further, we need to remain as sinless as possible
  - a) In other words, always working towards holiness
  - b) But why?
  - c) Because the closer we are to holiness, the more our goodness will shame our persecutors

1 Peter 3:16

Keep a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

- d) So remember: at all times in our lives, but especially when we face persecution, we should struggle not against the persecution but instead against the sin in ourselves
  - e) As a result, those who are malicious against us will be shamed
4. Part of holiness is praying *for* our persecutors

Matthew 5:44

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

- a) When someone does something mean or wrong or horrible to you or others you care about...
  - b) ...how willing are you to pray *for* that someone?
  - c) And yet, we are called to do just that
  - d) Getting a bit pointed here:
    - (1) Have church leaders wronged you in the past?
    - (2) Should you not then pray *for* them?
5. And finally, in all our persecutions, both large and small, we need to praise God that we are being persecuted for the Gospel

1 Peter 4:16

However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

- IV. This behavior we will exhibit, if we do all these things Scripture instructs of us, will be confusing, baffling to non-Christians
- A. What non-Christians don't understand is the ultimate paradox of Christian life
  - B. If we as Christians really do live lives of holiness, if we really do follow all the instructions of the Bible, our responses and our outlook will be seem strange and perplexing
  - C. The Apostle Paul wrote a passage that I think best sums up the Christian life paradox

2 Corinthians 4:8-12

<sup>8</sup>We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; <sup>9</sup>persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. <sup>10</sup>We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. <sup>11</sup>For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. <sup>12</sup>So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

D. A persecuted non-Christian reacts:

1. With hostility toward their persecutors
2. Desires retaliation or what might be called "justice," payment for wrongs committed
3. Holds on to enmity against his or her persecutors
4. And is displeased and upset about the persecution

E. But by contrast, a persecuted Christian ought to react:

1. With compassion and love toward their persecutors, even praying for them
2. Desiring not retaliation of their enemy but instead the feeding of the enemy if he's hungry, or providing him drink if he's thirsty
3. Holding not on to enmity but instead expressing forgiveness and love
4. And above all, being quite happy with being persecuted; in fact, rejoicing in the midst of the suffering of persecution

F. May God grant us the patience, wisdom, and strength to respond to all forms of persecution with joy, forgiveness, and love

G. Amen