

Reflections on “Blessed are the Persecuted”

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Introduction

One of my favorite musicals of all time is “The Sound of Music”. If you’ve heard it and/or if you’ve seen it, you know why. If you’ve never heard of it, maybe you can add it to your list of things to watch.

Most people know the songs from the musical, but they don’t think about the setting. The story takes place in Austria in the years leading up to WWII. Austria before WWII had a wonderful culture. Today, its best-known personality is Arnold Schwarzenegger - That’s a story for another day. Prior to WWII, it was known for great musicians like Mozart, and Franz Shubert and Johann Strauss, famous for his waltzes. Its dominant religion is Catholic.



When a wealthy man named Baron Von Trapp needed a governess for his children, he called the local convent. He was sent a young initiate named Maria. Baron Von Trapp is a widower, so as with any great family movie, he and Maria fall in love and get married.

While they are away on their honeymoon, something tragic happens in Austria. The tragic event was called the “Anschluss” (that is a German word for “joining”). What was that? One of Austria’s neighbors is Germany. At that time, Adolf Hitler and the Nazis had taken over Germany. Austria and Germany had at one time been part of the same empire. They had been separated in the 1800s. So, they have the same language, and they share a lot of culture.

Like a lot of Europeans at the time, many Austrians disliked the Nazis. Others liked them. To over-simplify the situation, the Germans said, “Hey Austria, we want you back, and we’re bigger than you.” Austria was given a choice: Be invaded or join without putting up a fight. The Austrians who liked the Nazis won the debate, so the Austria joined the Third Reich. Nazi troops and tanks followed shortly thereafter.

From that point forward, anyone who disliked the Nazis could only look forward to mistreatment. Last week, we discussed that kind of mistreatment. It’s also called “persecution”. Baron von Trapp was one of the Austrians who hated the Nazis, so he decided to resist. You can watch the movie to see how it all turns out.



One scene though, is important for our discussion today. Baron von Trapp and his new bride Maria return from their honeymoon to find their homeland filled with Nazi flags. One has been placed on the Von Trapp home, so Baron von Trapp immediately tears it down. The youngest of the Von Trapp children was a little girl named Gretel. She takes the hand of Maria and asks this question: “Why does everybody get upset when they see the flags with the big spider?”

“The Flags with the big spider”. That “spider” of course was the Nazi Swastika. Here is a sweet little innocent girl. Up until this time life has been good. She lives in a nice home (shown). She has a good family. She has all the food she wants to eat. She has nice clothes. She has toys. Her only problem until this point is that sometimes she’s told to go to bed earlier than she would like.



Von Trapp Family Estate

She has no idea what it means to be at war. She has no idea what is about to happen all over the world. She doesn’t understand that her homeland has been taken over by evil people whose symbol was the Swastika. She certainly doesn’t understand why anyone would like the evil people.

Her life is about to change. She is about to learn what it means to be at war. A part of learning about war, will be learning about persecution.

In our last session, we learned about the following statement made by Jesus:

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 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)

Review

Let’s quickly review from the last session. We said that people show hostility towards others when they believe they have been injured. They may show hostility when they think they’re going to be injured in some way. In other words, people think there is some kind of threat.

We arrived at the following practical definition of persecution: Persecution is when one person shows hostility and mistreatment to another person who they wrongly believe to be a threat. - It's meant to take away the threat.

Jesus tells us that, if we follow him, we will likely at some point be persecuted. We will be persecuted because we live in a world at war against God. In the midst of that war, God offers us peace through Jesus Christ. Accepting that peace means changing sides. We in essence defect from the armies of this world that battle against God, and we join God's kingdom. When we do that, we become a threat to all the people who remain at war with God.

Why would anyone want to follow Jesus knowing that they will be persecuted? If we are persecuted, Jesus said, we will be blessed. People who are persecuted because of righteous should rejoice and be glad, because they will receive a great reward in heaven.

OK. We spent a whole session on this last week. We learned a lot. Why are we still here?

We started our discussion by focusing on a sweet little girl who lived in a world about to break out into war. Because she was young and innocent, she didn't understand.

I'd like to share a problem that I see in the Twenty-First century American church. I think we have a whole lot of people who are like that little girl. They are totally oblivious to the fact that the world is at war with God. We'll create a vocabulary word for today: A Gretel. A Gretel is a Christian who doesn't know the world is at war with God.

Why is that? That's because America was started by a group of people who were influenced on different levels by Christianity. Some of the people at the roots of America were dedicated Christians. Others at least accepted the idea of Christianity, even if they weren't dedicated. So, for hundreds of years, many people in America saw a world that looked like this (right). You're looking at a painting by Norman Rockwell. It's from a series of four paintings depicting images of freedom. In particular, the kind of freedom that many people hope to be exemplified in America. This is "Freedom from Want". It pictures a family celebrating Thanksgiving. It features an elderly couple. They have lived in relative safety and freedom their entire lives. Because of that, they're old enough to have children and grandchildren, along with other friends who join them for the Thanksgiving meal. There's plenty of food.



*Normal Rockwell
"Freedom from Want"*

If you follow the implications of this painting, you would think that everyone in America will live to a ripe old age and die peacefully in their sleep after living happy and full lives.

Now, lots of people live in the real world. We know things don't always work out this way. But this is what many in America dream about, just like Normal Rockwell. When many American Christians of the 20th century looked at the world, they saw this. There are still lots of American Christians in the 21st century who still see this.

Here's what God sees when he looks at the world (right): When God looks at our world, he sees a world at war. *A world at war with him.* This is a spiritual war. This spiritual war sometimes erupts into human conflicts.

My fear for the American church is that we have a lot of Gretels - People who do not know war. I'm afraid the time has come that they must learn.



Today we will expand on one area of the war. When you train for war, you have to know what a fight looks like. You have to know who your enemies are. Imagine sending soldiers out into battle with no training. They see enemy combatants moving towards them. They respond by waiving and saying, "Hey, great guns you have there."

No, you prepare soldiers for battle by telling them who their enemy is. You tell your soldiers to recognize the enemy, and how to fight.

Here is a start to understanding what battle looks like. Jesus has warned us that those who follow him will face persecution. Persecution is a kind of spiritual battle.

Let's dig deeper. We'll start by looking at the kinds of people who will do battle with us. We need to recognize them.

I. The Enemy Combatants

Recall, last week we looked at one the core of sin: Sin is what people do when they want the things of God, but they don't want God.

Then recall that when people want the things of God, but they don't want God, they have two options: 1) They can attempt to control God. 2) They can attempt to remove God.

We're going to have to use a word here. There is a word for people who don't want God in their lives. The word is "God-less". It's actually a technical word. As such, it's a correct word. So, we'll use it.

Let's start with combatant type number 1: People who attempt to control God.

A. Enemy Combatant Types: People who attempt to control God

How do you control God? Well, you don't. You can never control God. However, there are things people have done over the years to attempt to control God.

In order to understand this, you need to understand what God wants for us. Among other things, God is good, and generous and giving. He wants us to be like him. Because he is good and generous and giving, guess what he does? He gives us good things. For example, God gave Adam and Eve a planet. Now understand this: God never gives good things expecting repayment. Adam and Eve could never repay God for his gift. Not in a billion years. God gives good things because he likes to give good things. If we become like him, we will give good things to him and others because we learn the joy of giving. "...God loves a cheerful giver." (II Corinthians 9:7)

In our last session, we said that sin is a terrible thing. One of the reasons it's terrible is that it corrupts our hearts. Unlike God, when we give, we very much expect something in return.

This is a bad start. It gets worse when we expect a lot from God when we give God little. This is the foundation of something called "legalism". The legalist creates all kinds of rules and laws, thinking that following those rules and laws obligates God to act in a certain way. The legalist wants to control God through rules.

The premier example of this happened one generation after the garden. In Genesis 4, we learn about Cain and Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. 3 In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. 4 And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, 5 but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. (Genesis 4:2-5)

So, notice something here. This story centers around **offerings**. Both Cain and Abel brought offerings to the Lord. God was happy with Abel's offering, but not with Cain's.

Let's look at God reaction:

6 Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? 7 If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it." (v 6-7)

We don't know exactly what happened here. Some have suggested that God likely gave Cain and Abel clear indications of what they should bring. Based on the rest of Scripture, I think that's a fair suggestion. Abel obeyed God. He brought what God had indicated, so God was pleased. Because God was happy, Abel was happy. There's nothing here saying, "and God rewarded Abel". It's just "God was happy, so Abel was happy". That's how it works when people become like God. **That's what righteousness looks like.**

Cain on the other hand, essentially said, "I make the rules. I will bring whatever I please. I will bring however much or however little I choose. **And you, God will be happy with it.**"

This is a bad attitude. Making up your own rules and then demanding that God be pleased is an attempt to control God. So, God was notably displeased.

Notice God's reaction: He doesn't call Cain names. He doesn't punish Cain. **God warns Cain.** God warns Cain that he has a problem of sin. Cain has a bad attitude. Cain must face his sin, otherwise it will control him.

How does Cain react?

8 Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. (v 8)

Here's what just happened: Cain was the first legalist. He made up his own rules in an attempt to control God. Those rules were the product of a bad attitude, which came from a bad heart. God called him on it. Cain responded by allowing his sin to overcome him. Instead of facing his sin, instead of facing his bad heart, Cain looked over at someone who obeyed God. He then

committed the ultimate act of persecution: He murdered his own brother. This kind of action went on for centuries, even up until today.

Jesus later referenced this. In his day, legalism was practiced by the Pharisees.

42 “Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone. (Luke 11:42)

So, we have this group, the Pharisees, who, just like Cain, perverted offerings to God. Offerings are good when they’re given with a good heart. However, the Pharisees used offerings to cover their evil hearts.

Luke records more words of Jesus later in that chapter:

49 Because of this, God in his wisdom said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.’ 50 Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, 51 from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. (Luke 11:49-51)

Jesus says that Abel was a prophet. One of many. The godless persecuted and killed many of them. When Jesus called the Pharisees on their sin, instead of looking to their own hearts, they came to view Jesus as a threat. And so, they began to persecute him.

Having learned about the first group, move on to the second at the second group of enemy combatants.

B. Enemy Combatant Types: People who attempt to remove God

If you can’t control God, you certainly can’t remove him. However, there are people who try.

In the time of Jesus, the people who attempted to remove God were represented largely by two groups: Sadducees and Romans

1. The Sadducees

The Sadducees were religious leaders in Israel. Let’s call them “godless religion”. That sounds like a contradiction but let me explain. The Sadducees loosely believed in God but didn’t believe in anything supernatural like miracles. Because they didn’t believe in the supernatural, they didn’t believe in a resurrection. One of the things we believe about God is that he chooses to work in supernatural ways. Different groups disagree about how often miracles occur, but there is certainly resurrection.

If God works in supernatural ways how could anyone miss it? Paul tells us in Romans:

18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. (Romans 1:18-19)

Paul tells us that God has made all kinds of things about himself evident even before he gives us Special Revelation like the Scripture of the Bible. To miss God, Paul tells us that godless people must suppress the knowledge of him. Well, why would they do that? ***Because doing this allows them to imagine that they have removed God.***

I once knew a little boy named ‘Mikey’. I visited him and his family once. His mother worked hard on dinner, and when it was time, she called out, “Mikey, dinner is ready. Come to the table.” Mikey didn’t feel like coming to the table. So, Mikey put his hands over his ears, shut his eyes hard, and sang a song. His mother calmly walked over and gently raised one of his eyelids with her thumb. She said, “I’m still here”. Mikey got a very puzzled look on his face as if to say, “Hey – you were supposed to disappear.”

Parents never go away no matter how hard children press their hands to their ears and no matter how loudly they sing. God does not go away no matter how hard you work to ignore him. However, lots of people seem to think they can suppress the knowledge of God.

As a practical matter, imagining that you can make God go away allows you to live as you wish. If you behave badly, there is no punishment, or so it seems.

What was the point of this for the Sadducees? The Sadducees ran the ancient Hebrew temple in Jerusalem. They made a business out of ripping off people who came to worship from all over the world. Imagine you were a faithful believer living far away from the Temple in a corner of the Roman empire – Some place like Rome. You decide you want to travel to Jerusalem to worship. You bring along some money, maybe a lot, so you can offer it at the temple. Because you live in Rome, you bring Roman currency. The priests in the temple would say that your money wasn’t good enough. You had to exchange your currency for Temple currency. The exchange rate on a good day was 4 to 8 percent.

To make a long story short, there was no need for this. It was a money-making scheme that enriched the Sadducees. One of the most famous scenes in the Bible is Jesus driving the money changers out of the temple. You can read about it in John 2. Jesus regarded this practice as evil. It had gone on for a long time because the Sadducees believed there would be no punishment for ripping off sincere worshippers from all over the world.

From that point forward, the Sadducees joined the Pharisees in persecuting Jesus. “Godless Religion” has been a problem for followers of Jesus ever since.

2. The Romans

The other group of people in Jesus’ day who attempted to remove God were the Romans. There’s a problem that occurs when people try to remove God. They find themselves in a mysterious and dangerous world. It’s not long before such people start looking for help.

In ancient days, that meant calling upon the idols. Recall that we read what Paul had to say about people who suppress the knowledge of God. He has more to say. Let’s read on in Romans:

20 For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles. (Romans 1:20-23)

When people attempt to remove God, they wind up creating idols. This is called “Pagan Religion”. Pagan religion creates false gods. They might look like creatures that surround the so-called worshippers. Animals like cats and dogs and birds, etc. Or the false gods may look like people.

Most of the history of the ancient followers of God involved combatting the followers of idols. In the day of Jesus, the Romans were the face of pagan religion.

The Romans oppressed all the Jewish people. They often joined in persecuting Christians. We’re told in Luke 23 that on the day that Jesus was put on trial, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea and Herod, Tetrarch in the region, became friends. Previously they had been enemies.

The Pharisees, the group who worked to control God, and the Sadducees, the group who attempted to remove God, also came together to plot against Jesus.

All forms of false religion in the days of Jesus came together to bring him down. The Pharisees, and Sadducees, and the Romans all joined to crucify Jesus.

So, these were the combatants who came together in the days of Jesus to persecute Jesus and his followers.

II. Enemy Combatants Today

We don't have time to cover persecution since the time of Jesus prior to the 20th century. So, we'll ask: What does this battle look like today?

Recall we have people who want to control God. We've learned that those people often do so through religious structures as the Pharisees did. Then, we have people who want to remove God. I will give some opinions.

Islam

Today, the group that best represents those who want to control God would be the Muslims. Islam is a religion of rules and regulations. You eat a certain way. You pray a certain way. I will mention the standard caveat: Many Muslims today don't wish ill to others. For that group, the problem is that they don't know Jesus. Because they don't know Jesus, they are in danger of eternal Judgement. Like everyone else, they need to learn about the peace that God offers through Jesus Christ.

However, there are many Muslims who clearly wish evil to others. We'll start with just the 20th century. On July 18th, 2020, the Wall Street Journal published the article, "When Turkey Destroyed Its Christians". The article starts with this line: "Between 1894 and 1924, the number of Christians in Asia Minor fell from some 3-4 million to just tens of thousands..." It then reports, "The bloodshed was importantly fueled throughout by religious animus. Muslim Turks—aided by fellow Muslims, including Kurds, Circassians, Chechens and Arabs—murdered about two million Christians."

Who was responsible? The article says people were killed by "Turkish government, army, police and populace." The whole Muslim population participated on some level in the extermination of Christians.

The article notes that unlike Germany, which took responsibility for the deaths that took place under Nazi rule, the Turks have never been called to account.

All over the world, Christians are persecuted by Muslims. Later major persecutions included Idi Amin of Uganda in the 1970s, who murdered some 500,000 Christians.

Communism

The next group would be people who attempt to remove God. They are best represented by socialists and communists. The founder of Communism, Karl Marx, had a powerful dislike for the concept of religion. The famous quote attributed to him is, "Religion is the opiate of the people." Communists have been responsible for the deaths of millions of people around the world.

Scholars disagree on the numbers, but it's not unusual to see figures as high as 100 million people killed by communists in the 20th century. Not all those people were believers, but many were.

This is one of the reasons that American Christians get so nervous when political candidates announce that they're socialists. Socialism has at its core a hatred for any religion. I have heard more than one person ask, "Why is it that you Christians are so bothered by socialism?" "Don't socialists just want to help the poor?" My reply: "What part of 100 million dead people is so hard to understand?"

Deaths are the worst part, but rampant persecution from communists exists to this day. The organization "Open Doors" charts persecution around the world. Their web site features an article from September 2019 charting the increase in persecution of Christians in China. It says there are 97 million Christians in China. For years, pastors were imprisoned in freezing jails and work camps. Believers had to meet secretly in homes. Then, over the last 20 years or so, it looked like the communist government was going to relent. For a while, it looked like they might be recognized by the government as legitimate. However, in 2019 the Chinese government began to crack down on churches.

Sadly, the persecution, including the violent persecution of Christians happens all over the world. And sadly, that wonderful picture by Normal Rockwell that so many Americans held to in the past is no promise for the future. I'm afraid I can't promise that persecution won't happen here. In fact, there are frightening signs that it's beginning. Because of time restraints, I have to stop here in describing the groups who persecute Christians today.

III. Our response

What is our response to all this? Our response is to remember some important things.

1) Remember that when we are hurt, we forgive.

33 When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. 34 Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:33-34)

There is no greater example of persecution than our Lord. He didn’t respond by calling the whole world to revolt and take revenge. He forgave.

2) Remember that we have a job to do.

14 But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” 15 But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, 16 keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. (1 Peter 3:14-16)

We are here on earth to represent our Lord Jesus Christ. We tell people about him. We answer their questions. We are told to do so with “gentleness and respect”. We live our lives the way that we believe our Lord would have us so that we can have a clear conscience.

3) Remember that we have each other.

1 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. (Philippians 2:1-2)

We need to work together in love. We need to encourage each other. We need to help each other. We must avoid allowing ourselves to be torn apart. Paul tells us to do everything we can be of “one mind.”

4) Finally, remember that Jesus rewards those who are faithful to him.

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 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)

Conclusion

Let's pull this all together. We opened our session today with an image of a little girl named Gretel. - An innocent child who didn't know about war. Do you know any Gretels?

Hopefully, we can be something more. Hopefully, today we have learned something about the enemy who will attack us. Hopefully, we have begun to gather the tools and the knowledge that we will need to stand.

Our Lord Jesus knows that many of us will see persecution. If we see it on this earth, his Holy Spirit walks with us. If we pay the ultimate price, he is there waiting for us.

Remember his words: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

