

The Promise of Suffering

John 15:18-27

Introduction

When it comes to the subject of travel, let me read some statements that were made a few decades ago from prophets who, in fact, did not prophesy so correctly.

- *The Quarterly Review*, of 1825, recorded this profound statement, “What could be more absurd than promoting the prospect of a locomotive able to travel twice as fast as a stagecoach?”
- *The Literary Digest*, of 1889, wrote this, “The ordinary horseless carriage is, at present, a luxury for the wealthy. And, although its price will probably fall in the near future, it will never, of course, come into as common use as the bicycle.”
- *Popular Science* magazine, of 1901, quoted William Baxter, saying, “As a means of rapid transit, travel by air will never begin to compete with the railroad.”

As hard as it is to believe, these quotes, at one time, reflected the average opinion. You can see how contemporary thought has repeatedly been turned on its ear.

Jesus Christ is in the process of turning the tables on popular Christian thinking, in the gospel by John, chapter 15. We have learned that:

- we are not producers of spiritual fruit, but bearers of His fruit, and
- love is not a feeling, but a decision.

Persecution Is Not An Exception, It Is The Rule!

Now, after telling us several wonderful things about our relationship to Him – that we are His closest friends and we are attached to his life-giving joy – the conclusion would be, we have got it “made in the shade”. What a life this Christianity will be. Surely, as our closest friend, He will smooth out life’s bumps, correct life’s mistakes, and give us health and wealth, prosperity and privilege. We will be sought after, loved, appreciated, and promoted by the world in which we live.

But, about the time you reach that conclusion, Jesus holds out His hands and shows His scars.

He continues, in John, chapter 15, with a jarring statement. Look at verses 18 and 19, and remember you are attached to the vine, you are a friend of the court.

If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

Now the phrases beginning with the word “if” do not imply that it might not happen. For example, “If you don’t set your alarm, you’ll be late for work” or “If you don’t take out the trash, you’re wife will feed you leftovers for supper.”

No, these “if” statements are true to life. In:

- verse 18, “If the world hates you . . .” – and they will,

- verse 19, “If you were of the world . . .” – but you are not,
- verse 22, “If I had not come and spoken to them . . .” – but He did, and
- verse 24, “If I had not done among them the works which no one else did . . .” – but He did.

These are not possibilities, these are assumptions.

Jesus says, “If you make Me your closest friend, the world is going to hate you, revile you, disdain you, ridicule you, desert you, ignore you, pity you – any one of the things they did to Me.”

Frankly, we are presenting a distorted message when we try to sell Jesus to the masses for all the positive reasons and yet, hide from them the scars; the cross. Discipleship is impossible without a cross.

Pat Robertson, in his book, *The Secret Kingdom*, writes from the popular vantage point of guaranteed prosperity. He urges Christians to employ the “laws of prosperity to which God Himself is bound.” He writes,

It’s a bit like tuning into a radio or television station, you get on the right frequency and you pick up the program.

So, what are we to say of those who are never healed or who never get that financial miracle?

He has either failed to grasp the points we have been making about the operation of the kingdom, or he is not living according to the principles we have been exploring.

Michael Horton, a reformed theologian, wrote a scathing rebuke of prosperity theology, in his book *Made in America*. He wrote,

The gospel is now consumer-centered, rather than God-centered. It is as if God must be justified before the sinner; now it is the unbeliever who has to be satisfied with God and His terms . . . and so we package our gospel in attractive terms and with attractive promises to sell Christianity to the people of Vanity Fair.

Do you want to see prosperity theology? Turn to Hebrews, chapter 11, and take a look at our forefathers in the faith – first, second, third, and fourth century Christians, worldwide. Look at verses 36 through 38, as it talks about these early Christians.

[they] experienced mocking and scourging, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated, (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.

The theology of Robertson, as well as Hagin, Hinn, Copeland, and a number of others, is indeed, “Made in America”. It is consumer oriented; consumer driven.

The incredible thing about Jesus Christ is that, in John, chapter 15, He is turning the tables on contemporary Christian thought. When you come to Christ and He becomes your closest friend – you may lose your job, not keep it; you may lose your friends, not make more.

We have, teaching in our church, a professor who faced incredible pressure, from his peers and superiors, to be silent about his faith. We have students who, because of their testimony, received a lower grade in a college class. We have Christians, in our church family, who have been made outcasts from their extended family because of their faith.

For the sake of the Lord, this chapter in John, reveals, you will face derision, reviling, pity, scorn, and a host of other responses from the world. And Jesus is saying, in effect, “If you haven’t faced it, I’m really not your closest friend.”

Did you know that missiologists estimate that, at any given time, sixty percent of the world’s Christians are facing persecution?

Deitrich Bonhoeffer opposed Hitler’s regime and, as a result, this pastor and theologian paid with his life. One of the many statements he wrote was, “Jesus Christ invites a person to come and die.”

Notice the last verses of chapter 15, verses 26 and 27.

When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness of Me, and you will bear witness also, because you have been with Me from the beginning.

The word “witness” is the same Greek word that is translated “martyr”.

We need to talk about something we will call, “stepping over the line”. That is, stepping over the line of secret Christianity to public Christianity. And, by the way, putting a sign of the fish on your bumper is the beginning, not the end of public disclosure.

Persecution “Then”

In order to understand John, chapter 15, we have to stop and look backward. We need to remember that, by this time in the life of the church, there was the constant threat of persecution. Christianity was actually illegal. A city official needed only to ask whether a man was a Christian and, if he was, no matter what he had or had not done, he was liable for punishment by death.

By the time John wrote this gospel, the hatred of Christianity had long begun. Tacitus, a first century Roman historian, wrote of them as “a people who were hated.” Seutonius, also a historian of the time, wrote of “a race of men who belong to a new and evil superstition.”

The point was, in a day when many gods were worshipped, Christianity was out of step – it was different and it was a convicting challenge to the politically correct Roman society.

Caesar worship

The unifying principle which bound the vast empire of Rome was religious. It was in Asia Minor that people began to think of Caesar, the Emperor, as the god who embodied Rome. They did so in sheer gratitude for the blessings Rome had brought. The “pax Romana,” or “the peace of Rome,” stretched from Germany to North Africa; from the Euphrates to Britain.

At first, the emperors discouraged this worship, but then saw that they could not stop the movement. At first, Caesar worship was confined to Asia Minor, but it soon spread everywhere. Then the government realized that this could be used, as nothing unifies like religion. So, there came the day when, once a year, every inhabitant of the Roman Empire burned a pinch of incense to the godhead of Caesar, saying, “Caesar is Lord!”

By so doing, he showed that he was a loyal citizen of Rome. When he had done this, he actually received a certificate to say that he had done it, and he could go back to worshipping his many other gods, or no god at all.

This is precisely what a Christian could never do – he could call no man “Lord,” except Jesus Christ. They refused conformity, therefore they were considered dangerous and disloyal.

Jewish ostracism

William Barclay has compiled a list of the many accusations against the early Christians. They were said to be:

- insurrectionists,
- cannibals (which was a misinterpretation by outsiders who observed their communion practice),
- and incendiaries (they often looked to the Second Coming of Christ and preached that the world would eventually burn up with fire, as II Peter, chapter 3, records).

When Nero, the Roman emperor (and Paul’s executioner), wanted to rebuild Rome, he secretly ordered the city to be burned. Tacitus and Seutonius agree that it was Nero himself, who ordered the fires. After the fires were out, that had eventually burned two-thirds of Rome to the ground, Nero would accuse the Christians of doing so, in order to fulfill their sermons on a future fire.

Tacitus wrote,

Nero looked about for a scapegoat and found one in a race of men commonly called Christian. The name was derived from Christos, who, in the reign of Tiberius, suffered under Pontius Pilate. Nero proceeded to force confessions from some of them, and on such false evidence, a number of Christians were convicted. They were put to death with exquisite cruelty, and to their sufferings, Nero added mockery and derision. Some were covered with skins of wild animals, and given to be devoured by wild dogs; others were nailed to crosses; a number of them were burned alive; many, covered with inflammable matter, were tied to raised poles and then set on fire to serve as torches during the night for Nero’s garden parties.

How the words of Jesus, must have echoed in their hearts, “The world will hate you, as it hated Me – and without cause.”

Divided families

By the way, one other “trumped up” reason for Christians to be persecuted was the charge that they were tampering with family relationships; that is, dividing families, splitting up homes. Young people were renouncing idolatry and coming to faith in Christ; wives were being saved; husbands were coming to Christ. Society was so “topsy turvy” that the early disciples, in the King James Version of the book of Acts, chapter 17, verse 6, were referred to as people who had, “. . . turned the world upside down.”

Jesus had prophesied, in Matthew, chapter 10, verses 34b through 38,

. . . I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, . . . and a man's enemies will be the members of his household. He who loves his father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.

Jesus is saying, “If you want to follow Me, then understand, I don't offer you riches, and prosperity, and health, and promotion, and peace, I offer you a rugged cross.”

Persecution “Now”

Now that was persecution “then,” so what about “now”? Obviously, we are not burning at the liberal's stake, or being fed to the democratic lions. And, no one is tied to a stake to serve as a torch for the President's evening parties – at least, not yet.

Does Jesus intend for this passage to apply to us? *Absolutely!*

Paul wrote to Timothy, in II Timothy, chapter 3, verse 12, and said,

. . . indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

We need to go back to John, chapter 15, verse 18, to begin clarifying. What did Jesus mean by “the world,” when He said, in this verse,

If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you.

This term, “the world,” is used in a number of different ways in the Scriptures. “The world” equals:

- the created world, in John, chapter 1, verse 10, when it says, “. . . the world was made through Him . . .”,
- the world of humanity, in John, chapter 3, verse 16, when it says, “For God so loved the world . . .”, and
- the world system; that is, the world's plans, activities, philosophies, values, and agendas, in John, chapter 15, verse 18. As Christians, we are told, “And do not be conformed to this world . . .”, by Paul, in Romans, chapter 12, verse 2, referring to the world system of values, plans, and lifestyles.

Other passages inform us that this world system is authored and controlled by Satan. In II Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 4, Paul calls Satan, “. . . the god of this world . . .”.

And, look back at John, chapter 14, verse 30, where Jesus says,

I will not speak much more with you, for the ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in Me

Turn back further to chapter 12, verse 31.

Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world shall be cast out.

Now look ahead at chapter 17, verses 14 through 17.

I have given them Thy word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth.

The truth is, as long as you conform to the world, with its fads, fashions, and values, you will get along.

But, when you begin to shine as a light of righteousness and act as salt that confronts a decaying society, you will soon discover that you are not only out of step, but out of place!

John MacArthur writes an interesting thought on this. He says,

Christians are the conscience of the world; our testimony confronts the world system with a righteous standard that exposes its selfish wretchedness. We are its conscience. So when we leave the world at the rapture before

the Tribulation, all hell will literally break loose on earth because the conscience of the world will be gone.

That is the point of John, chapter 15, verses 21 and 22, when Jesus says,

But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin.

This is critical to understand. Jesus is not talking about sin in general, because whether He came or not, men would still be sinners; He is talking about the guilt of willful rejection in the presence of total revelation. The most tragic sin a person could ever be guilty of is to have the specifics of God's revelation, and then reject it.

That world had come face to face with God's standard – and they rejected Him. They hated what He had exposed them to be. That standard is now in print – they had the full revelation of the Living Word, we have the full revelation of the written Word – and our world hates it still.

In 1971, a revival came to many churches in Western Canada. It made news in the secular press because of the number of people going to stores and other businesses to make restitution for past wrongdoing. Whether it was paying unpaid income tax, or admitting dishonesty in business dealings, or going to the Canadian border to confess they had lied about goods brought over from the States – hundreds of people were willing to do anything to be fully right with God and man. One author, writing about the incident, recorded,

When these Christians displayed such a desire for righteousness, the world both admired and hated them. On the one hand, the people of that world were thankful that the Christians had the courage to make past wrongs right; but on the other hand they deeply resented such integrity. For in the process of seeing righteousness at work in the lives of others, they saw their own hidden sins exposed.

Have you ever lived with the guilt of sin and a conscience that just would not be quiet? That is what you and I are to the world, as we proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ – that He came to die for sinners.

So, as a result, the world will respond to its conscience in a number of differing ways. Jesus calls their response “persecution”.

Chuck Colson once said that we are a lot like Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonalds. When asked, by the *New York Times*, what he believed in, he responded by saying, “God, my family, and McDonald's hamburgers,” but then, he added, “and when I get to the office, I reverse the order.”

Ladies and gentlemen, if you refuse to reverse the order and instead, keep God before hamburgers, you will be walking out of step with the world system. You will be:

- ostracized by your peers,
- ridiculed for being some Victorian relic from previous generations,
- personally disliked for your nonconformity to the group,
- considered no longer an authority in your field because of your “religious fanaticism”,
- denied a promotion because you refuse to place the company first on your list of priorities,
- considered intolerant and bigoted because sinful lifestyles are not accepted by you,
- pitied by others for your simple lifestyle,
- ridiculed any time a public figure falls,
- betrayed and stepped on in the ladder climb because you would not fend for yourself, and
- laughed at for your purity and mocked for your values.

I think of the policeman who was denied a promotion because he would not join in his bosses' drinking. And, the man who was working in a warehouse and knew that certain goods were damaged by the mishandling of warehouse employees – and would not sign slips declaring that the goods were damaged on arrival.

Ladies and gentlemen, although we may be exempt from torture and death, the basic contempt of mankind for Jesus Christ comes to the surface in every culture where the Christian and the church shines brightly in the world.

One day, my kids brought home some papers from school. Attached was a letter, from the local Board of Education, explaining a new program called,

Character Education. My wife and I read it over and were, frankly, amazed at the contents and, even more, by its stated purposes of:

To help children attending public schools learn to think before they act and to understand the fundamental differences between right and wrong.

I am all for that, by the way, but it was interesting, because I had read, in the local newspaper, of an educator saying that there is no absolute right and wrong, that right is whatever society decides is good for its own purposes. And yet, this program was talking about an absolute right and wrong.

There were several characteristics listed that they were going to try to teach children – courage, good judgment, integrity, and kindness.

Listen to their definition of kindness, “Treating others as you would like to be treated.”

Now, there was no Bible reference next to this, but I was really getting suspicious, as I read, because this sounded like a Christian was somewhere behind this project.

Listen to this, as it relates to self-discipline, “Self-discipline is being in proper control of your words, actions, impulses, and desires. Choosing abstinence from pre-marital sex, drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and other harmful substances and behaviors.”

We wondered, “How did this ever slip through the printing press of the local Board of Education and arrive at our home?”

So, I started making some phone calls. I finally reached the office of the chairman of our local Board of Education. The secretary answered, and I said, “I’ve got some material, brought home by my kids, and I want to talk to the chairman.”

She said, rather tentatively, “Well, she’s in a meeting.”

I could tell in her voice, “Oh no, not another call.”

So, I immediately identified myself, “My name is Stephen Davey. I’m the pastor of Colonial Baptist Church in Cary. I just wanted to call and loudly applaud.”

She says, “Oh!”

She actually gave me the chairman’s home phone number. She said, “She will appreciate your call.”

She told me three times, “Please call her.”

I never did reach her, but I did get the task force chairman of this character education program. I will not identify her, as I do not want to make her job any more difficult. In fact, I told her, “It would be wonderful to have you come to church and stand, so we could applaud. It would probably make it tougher though, wouldn’t it?”

She said, “Absolutely.”

I talked to her for quite awhile and, after a couple of questions, I just went ahead and asked her, “Where do you go to church?”

That was before we had identified ourselves in any way. She gave me the name of an evangelical church in the area that was not a surprise to me.

I said, “You’re a Christian, aren’t you?”

She said, “I am.”

I asked, “How in the world are you getting this even through the photocopier? I think it stops when it sees things like this in print.”

She said, “Well, we’re really fighting an uphill battle. It is the challenge of our chairman and myself and our task force to have this implemented.”

The chairman, by the way, is also a believer. And I said, “You must be getting phone calls; you must be getting letters.”

She told me that the chairman has already had her life threatened, by way of letter and phone. She said that she, personally, has gotten letters from people that were too filthy to repeat. She said not just people in society, but people in the liberal church, who are saying, “What in the world do you think you are up to?”

Do you know what is going on? Even though Jesus’ name never appeared, even though these values did not have a Bible reference next to them, the world can smell it – and they hate it.

So, I told her that I would share with you what is going on and we, together, would do nothing more than loudly applaud their action.

When you stand for Jesus Christ in a secular, greedy, selfish, valueless, godless world, you might get a letter or a phone call. When you step over the line from secret Christianity to public disclosure, where you say, “I am going to live this way and I will bring Jesus Christ to work with me, from 9 to 5, or 6, or 7. He is my friend.” and, if you are willing to introduce Him to others – you will be hated in some

way or another. It may cost you everything, but, in the end, you have lost nothing and gained everything.

Erwin Lutzer wrote,

This message in the upper room effectively puts an end to the widespread belief that success and wealth are the inevitable result of living a committed Christian life. Christ promised that in the world we will have tribulation.

Lessons Learned From Persecution

What can we learn from persecution? Let me give you several lessons.

We should remember that, while hatred is unfounded and unjustified, it is to be expected

1. We should remember that, while hatred is unfounded and unjustified, it is to be expected.

Did you notice John, chapter 15, verse 25?

But they have done this in order that the word may be fulfilled that is written in their Law, "They hated Me without a cause."

This is a quote from two of David's Psalms.

Why was Jesus rejected? The total of all the reasons given is that He declared Himself to be equal with God and, out of envy, they delivered Him up. Are any of them good reasons? No. In the light of history and the future, the nation Israel was unreasonable – closed minded and self-centered. But hatred for Christ was not only expected, it was prophesied. And, He prophesies the same for you!

We should be aware that being ridiculed, ignored, rejected, despised, and any other form of hatred is an evidence that we are fulfilling our mission as Christ's witnesses

2. Secondly, we should always be aware that being ridiculed, ignored, rejected, despised, and being the recipient of any other form of hatred is evidence that we are fulfilling our mission as Christ's witnesses.

C. S. Lewis wrote,

Now I don't mean that we should run the risk of making a nuisance of ourselves by witnessing at improper times, but there comes a time when we must show our Christian colors, if we are to be true to Jesus Christ.

The point is, do not run from that job, that family, that neighbor that dislikes, ignores, and reviles you. You are the light and that is where you shine.

We should constantly be concerned that the world's hatred for us is balanced by our love for each other

3. Thirdly, we should constantly be concerned that the world's hatred for us is balanced by our love for each other.

Notice verse 17.

This I command you, that you love one another.

Why?! Because no one in the world system will ever love you, so make sure you love each other.

I read, recently, of Jackie Robinson. He was the first black major league baseball player to rise from, what was called, the Negro Leagues. He would be elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1962, for his career with the Brooklyn Dodgers. It was not an easy beginning for this young man. The prejudiced crowds jeered and threatened him. During one game, before a Cincinnati crowd, the jeers were especially harsh. Peter Golenbock told of something that happened that challenged the crowd and encouraged Jackie Robinson. Pee Wee Reese, a teammate of Robinson's, strolled out, before the heckling crowd, to where Robinson stood at second base. When he reached Robinson, he threw his arm around Jackie's shoulders and just stood beside him. The heckles did not stop, but they were shared now – not by one lonely player, but by two friends.

The world, Jesus says, is going to heckle and jeer, and maybe even kill. Encouragement will come, as you throw your arms around each other's shoulders and share the weight – and stay the course.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/16/1994 by Stephen Davey.

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