

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED

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### Matthew 5:10-12

The last Beatitude in the gospel of Matthew reads like this.

*Matthew 5:10. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*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, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

### Suffering for Christ

The blessing here is upon those who suffer. Once again, the Lord Jesus disturbs our sense of value. The last kind of people that this world regards as blessed are those who suffer. We regard those who suffer to be the pitiable ones. They are the unfortunate ones. The Lord Jesus teaches us to view suffering from a different angle. For Him, those who suffer are the ones who should be envied. They are the blessed ones. You see, it all depends on how you look at suffering. If you think carnally, you will pity those who suffer. But if you think spiritually, you will regard it as a privilege to suffer for the name of Christ.

It is important to notice that here, we are not talking about suffering in a general sense. This is not about the suffering that you experience because you have cancer or because you lost your job. As Christians, God expects that we face these stressful situations in a spiritual and Christlike manner. But this is not the point of the Beatitude. The Lord Jesus is talking about a suffering that is peculiar to genuine believers: the suffering that is endured because of righteousness. It is a suffering that only those who live godly lives experience, those who have righteousness in their lives.

Let no Christian ever suffer for wrongdoing. God does not bless those who suffer because of their sinful conduct. Jesus is talking about a situation in which you suffer because of righteousness, and not for any other reason.

If you desire righteousness and you want to build your life on the foundation of righteousness, then be prepared to be persecuted. The apostle Paul says in 2Timothy 3:12 that all those who live godly lives will be persecuted. *Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.* We don't have to look for persecution. Sooner or later it will come to us. If that doesn't happen, you can be sure that there is something wrong with your Christianity. Satan does not waste his time with us if we don't disturb him. Why should he? The devil will persecute only those who are

giving him trouble. And you are giving him trouble when your life speaks forth the glory of God. You can see why it is so blessed to be persecuted. It proves that you are giving Satan a great deal of trouble by the godliness of your life. If you are the Bible type of Christian, it is guaranteed that you are going to suffer persecution.

## **Suffering: the gateway into the kingdom of God**

*For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* The kingdom of God belongs to those who are persecuted for the sake of Christ. In the book of Acts, we learn that suffering is the gateway, the pathway into the kingdom of God. What we mean is that there is no way you can enter the kingdom of God without walking through the gate of suffering. Let's read Acts 14:22. Here we are told that Paul is being persecuted. He has just been given such a stoning that he was left for dead. Let's begin with v. 19.

*Acts 14:19. Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.*

*20 However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city. And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe.*

*21 And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch,*

*22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God."*

How do you enter the kingdom of God? Through many tribulations. This is a rather graphic way of speaking about persecution. Suffering is portrayed as a kind of gate through which you enter into the kingdom of God. You must enter the kingdom of God through those many tribulations. In other words, suffering is the gateway into the kingdom of God.

This is much like what the Lord Jesus Himself said in Luke 13. *Strive to enter through the narrow gate* (Luke 13:24). Enter into where? Into the kingdom of God. How? Through the narrow gate. What is the narrow gate? It is the narrow gate of persecution, tribulation and suffering. The Lord Jesus does not deceive any man. He tells us the facts as they are. You want to enter into the kingdom of God? It is not going to be easy. The road is narrow. You will have to strive. You will have to struggle with suffering. That is why the Lord Jesus says that if you are not willing to take up your cross and follow Him, if you are not willing to suffer, then you cannot be His disciple.

In the Scriptures, suffering is presented as a spiritual blessing that the Christian should welcome with joy. The disciple who understands the Word of God has learned to see suffering spiritually. He is able to appreciate the spiritual value of suffering. I would like to show from the Bible eight points that will explain why suffering is of such spiritual value. And hopefully, the next time we will experience suffering, we will rejoice in it and not think that something terrible has happened to us.

## **The mark of a Christian**

First of all, we rejoice in suffering and in being persecuted because it shows that we are not of this world. This is what the Lord Jesus says in John 15:19.

*John 15:19. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.*

If you think like the world, if you behave like the world, if you talk like the world, the world is not going to persecute you. Why should they? You are just one of them and they love their own. But when you are different, when you show that you are not of this world, then they are going to start hating you because your difference shows up their sins. And this will cause you to be persecuted.

In other words, you are going to be persecuted when you bear the mark of the true Christian, which shows that you are not of this world. How do you bear the mark? By the righteousness in your life. The world does not like righteousness because righteousness exposes the sins of the world. A sinner feels very uncomfortable in the presence of a righteous man because the life of the righteous man is already condemning the sinner. The world felt uncomfortable in the presence of Jesus because His righteous life rebuked them.

You are different because you don't live for this world. You live for the world that is to come. Your sense of value is radically different. The man of the world wants money. Money brings power. It brings status. It brings material satisfaction. But by your life, you are saying to the world that all those things that they hold so dear mean nothing to you. You don't live for unrighteous mammon but for Christ and His righteousness. Such view of life condemns the sense of value of the world. They feel uncomfortable. They feel annoyed. And sooner or later, they will start saying bad things about you because you do not belong to them. The persecution that you endure shows that you are not of this world.

### **Purifying our faith**

Secondly, the blessedness of suffering lies in the fact that suffering purifies our faith. It tests the genuineness of our faith. This is what the apostle Peter tells us in 1Peter 1:6-7.

*1Peter 1:6. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials,  
7 that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though **it is tested by fire**, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*

Do you see the value of suffering? Suffering is like a fire that purifies your faith. The genuineness of your faith is being tested by the suffering that you face.

You know, we can all be Christians when being a Christian means that everybody is nice to you. It is nice to be a Christian when brothers and sisters in the Lord are always encouraging you and smiling to you. You feel loved. You feel that people care about you. Under those conditions, who would object to be a Christian? But wait till you are persecuted for being a Christian. Then being a Christian might not be so enjoyable. How many will remain faithful to Christ when persecution comes, when the church is being attacked by Satan or by the world? That's when you see who are the true Christians and who are the false ones. Suffering purifies the church because it purifies the faith of those who are in the church.

### **Ceasing from sin**

Thirdly, suffering helps us to cease from sin. The fire of persecution leads us to cease from sin. 1Peter 4:1 reads like this.

*1Peter 4:1. Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for **he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.***

A person who suffers has ceased from sin in the sense that he has turned his back upon sin, upon the world and upon the flesh. A person who has consciously decided that he will accept suffering for the sake of Christ has truly finished in his life with sin. He has chosen to deny himself and his fleshy desires. He made the firm decision to identify himself with Christ and His sufferings. In suffering for righteousness' sake, he is not sinning. He is living righteously. He has ceased from sin. This does not mean that he is sinless but that he has made a break with sin.

The more a person suffers for Christ, the closer he becomes to Christ. And the closer he becomes to Christ, the more sin loses its appeal. The person who understands the value of suffering is able to see that it breaks the power of sin in his life. Suffering becomes a tool by which he can progress spiritually as he depends on God's grace.

### **Living for the will of God**

Fourthly, and very closely related to the previous point, we see that suffering enables a believer to live for the will of God. This is what we read in 1 Peter 4:2.

*1 Peter 4.2. That he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but **for the will of God.***

Suffering not only helps a Christian to cease from sin, but it enables him to live by the will of God. A person who does not accept suffering is not prepared to put his life totally under the will of God. Why would he? Unless you are ready to live completely under God's will and not your own will, you will not accept suffering. You will fight back. You will groan. You will mumble.

The Lord Jesus put His life totally under God's will. He accepted suffering with joy. This attitude towards suffering allowed Him to learn obedience. He learned to live in submission to the will of God. The writer to the Hebrews says of Jesus that *Though He was a Son, he learned obedience by the things which He suffered* (Hebrews 5:8). Although Jesus was the Son of God, He learned obedience through what He suffered. If Jesus had to learn obedience through suffering, how much more do we need to learn obedience through suffering! Suffering is the school of obedience. It is suffering that teaches us the need to obey. It is in the midst of suffering that we learn obedience to the will of God.

### **Becoming spiritually mature**

This takes us to the fifth point. And here it is. There is value in suffering because it is suffering that matures us. Let's read Hebrews 2:10.

*Hebrews 2:10. For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, **to make the author of their salvation perfect through sufferings.***

How was Jesus made perfect? Through sufferings. Spiritual maturity comes through suffering. Suffering is the means by which we become spiritually mature.

The Lord Jesus expressed this truth in another way in the Parable of the Sower. In Matthew 13:5-6, He said that the seed that fell on rocky ground withered away when the sun came up because it did not have enough root. It didn't make it to the kingdom of God. What is the sun compared to in this parable that caused the plant to wither? The Lord Jesus tells us in vv. 20-21.

*Matthew 13:20. But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy;  
21 yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For **when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.***

The Lord Jesus says that the sun represents the persecution and the trials that come upon the person who receives the Word of God. And notice this. The sun, which enables the healthy plant to grow, is also that which destroys those who do not have root. The sun, namely persecution, is life to

one and death to another. Suffering will bring maturity and growth to the seeds that have root. But the same suffering will bring destruction and death to those seeds that have no root in righteousness.

So here we find that it is persecution, like the sun, that brings maturity. We will reach full maturity when we are exposed to the heat of the sun, to the fire of suffering.

### **Bringing the gospel to others**

Let us go on to the sixth point on the value of suffering. Paul says something very important about suffering in Colossians 1:24. This is what he writes.

*Colossians 1:24. I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church.*

Notice the word ‘rejoice’. ‘I rejoice in my sufferings for you.’ Paul is not groaning or complaining. He rejoices in what he suffers. Why is suffering such a blessing for Paul? ‘Because in that suffering,’ Paul says, ‘I am completing that which is lacking in the sufferings of Christ.’

Now, you might say, ‘Can anything be lacking in the sufferings of Christ?’ Well, according to Paul, something is missing. Christ’s suffering served to atone for our sins. Only the blood of Jesus can take away the sins of the world. Let no one say something different. We cannot die to atone for the sins of others. But there is an aspect of suffering which is also important to the salvation of the church and which Christ did not fully bear. It is a suffering which is for you and me to endure. You see, bringing the gospel to the end of the earth has a high price attached to it. If Paul did not suffer, how would the gospel have reached all the places where Paul preached? Who would bring the message of salvation to the world but those who are willing to suffer like Paul did? No one would receive the blessing of the blood of Christ unless you and I bring the message of salvation to the world. And in doing that, we have to expect suffering, just like Paul suffered.

Therefore, the suffering of the faithful ones is essential to the salvation of mankind in the sense that without their suffering, the gospel would never reach them. This is the part of the suffering that is for us to endure. That part is the part which Christ has left for us to do in order to complete the work of salvation.

### **Drawing near to God**

There is another reason to rejoice in this suffering for righteousness’ sake. Here is our 7<sup>th</sup> point. It is through suffering that you find God’s presence so close to you. All those who have suffered for the sake of Christ would have found that never is God’s presence closer to you than when you suffer.

You remember that when Paul and Silas were thrown into a prison, they sang hymns to the Lord (Acts 16:25). They rejoiced in being in prison for God’s sake. And as a result of that, the Lord’s presence was there. He confirmed His presence with an earthquake. It was such a strong earthquake that the jail fell apart. The special presence of God in suffering.

In 2Timothy 4:16-17, Paul said, *At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me ... **But the Lord stood with me**...* Paul was on trial for his life and everybody deserted him. But God was there, with him. It was in the midst of suffering that he felt God’s presence so close to him.

## Being a prophet of God

Let us come to the last of these points. Here is the 8<sup>th</sup> point. Why should we rejoice in suffering for Christ? The Lord Jesus says here in Matthew 5:12, *For great is your reward in heaven.* Why will the reward be great? Because in suffering, you will be well pleasing to God and you will be found in the company of the prophets. *For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.* You prove yourself to be a genuine prophet of God.

You know, all the disciples are called to be prophets of Christ, bringing the good news of salvation to others. And when you endure suffering in bringing salvation to others, you prove yourself, not only to be a disciple, but also to be a true prophet of God. Isn't that enough to cause us to rejoice? We rejoice because it is to such people that the kingdom of God belongs.

I pray that all these points are helping you to understand the spiritual value of suffering. Never again should we find ourselves groaning and moaning because of suffering. Suffering for righteousness' sake is part of the privileges enjoyed by the true Christians. *For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake* (Philippians 1:29).