

HAPPY ARE THE HARASSED MATTHEW 5:10-12

Earlier this week I was reading the book of Isaiah in my morning devotions. Isaiah was describing the coming Messiah, whom he likened to “a shoot” that would emerge from the stump of Jesse (11:1). Jesse is the father of King David. The stump stands for David’s royal family tree that was cut down when Babylon carried off Judah into captivity. Isaiah was predicting that a future King from David’s family would rise from this seemingly dead stump, and this King, who is compared to a Branch, would bear fruit.

This Branch and its fruit are described in the next several verses of chapter 11. **Vs. 2**, *“The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD...”*

The most notable feature about this royal Branch from the lineage of King David is not His political or diplomatic skills, but His spiritual prowess. He would be a spiritual Giant, possessing the wisdom, knowledge and power of God Himself.

He goes on, **verse 4**, *“...with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.”*

Isaiah is telling us that the fruit of this future King—Messiah—is the administration of divine justice, when wrongs will be made right and evildoers will be vanquished. The result of this justice is described with vivid metaphors way in the next few verses.

Verses 6-10.

⁶ The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. ⁷ The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. ⁸ The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest. ⁹ They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. ¹⁰ In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.

Isaiah is describing the peace that will settle upon the earth when Messiah comes and establishes His kingdom. He is describing an absence of animosity, hostility, violence, and danger. He is describing an environment where the fiercest former enemies live in absolute harmony and peace.

Isaiah’s description of this future kingdom in chapter 11 was instrumental in shaping the concept of Messiah and His mission in the minds of Jesus’ contemporaries. Upon the arrival of Messiah they expected Him to immediately and dramatically overthrow God’s enemies and establish justice and peace in the way Isaiah described. They anticipated that, from the get-go, He would be such a socially and politically imposing figure that competing kingdoms would instantly melt in His presence, and He would reign unrivaled and uncontested.

So when Jesus showed up and there was talk that He might be the Messiah, and then when John the Baptist confirmed it, people were confused. He didn’t fit the messianic profile they had imagined. He didn’t have any political or military credentials. He didn’t have an army; He didn’t even carry a sword. Instead He recruited a ragtag band of blue-collar Galileans to follow Him around and listen to His stories. He didn’t live in a palace and dine

with dignitaries; He didn't even have a home, and He often went without food because He claimed that His food was to do His Father's will.

What's more, when He spoke about the attitudes that citizens of the kingdom possessed, and when He described the things kingdom citizens might have to endure, it didn't sound like a kingdom that would be free of opposition or hostility. It sounded like kingdom citizens might be picked on and stepped on. It sounded like kingdom people, instead of being treated like royalty, might be treated like scum.

Listen to what Jesus said in **Matt. 5:10-12**. ¹⁰ *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* ¹¹ *"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.* ¹² *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

This is not exactly Isaiah 11. This is not a portrait of a kingdom where its citizens are living peacefully under the reign of an uncontested King. Jesus describes a kingdom comprised of citizens who are oppressed and persecuted and reproached. Which implies that its King has adversaries that appear to be getting the upper hand.

That was unexpected. This is not the kingdom Jews thought they understood from the Old Testament prophets. So Jesus was doing some major revision to their theology, and you can be sure that it caused some consternation. Let's look at what Jesus says and then see what it tells us about the kingdom, and how it can shape our understanding of God's plans and purposes.

First, Jesus pronounces a blessing on those who are persecuted for righteousness, or, literally, *"for the sake of righteousness."* He's talking about people who are being picked on, not because they have done something wrong, but because they are doing what is right. They are living in such a manner that their attitudes and choices and behavior are irritants to people who observe them.

Why? Why would the attitudes and choices and behavior of those who are doing good irritate others to the degree that it would cause others to attack them? A couple of years after Jesus said these words He said to His disciples on the very night He was arrested and crucified, ¹⁸ *"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.* 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.* ²⁰ *Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:18-20).*

Why do followers of Christ suffer? Why is there hostility and angst toward Christians that results in them being picked on and persecuted? It's very simple. It's because they don't belong to the world; they belong to Jesus, who is from heaven. And there is a clash between the values, priorities, perspectives, and behavior of these two very different realms. Those who belong to Jesus have kingdom values and kingdom priorities and perspectives. They behave in a manner that corresponds to their King, the Lord Jesus. So when people of the world lash out at them they are actually lashing out at Jesus.

Peter, who was present when Jesus said these words, wrote a number of years later, ¹² *"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.* ¹³ *But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ..." (1 Pet. 4:12-13).*

We might think it strange that Christ-followers would suffer, but that's not nearly as strange as *Jesus* suffering. He was perfectly good and loving and kind and compassionate.

He was perfectly holy and righteous. He never did anything wrong. He never even had a selfish thought or an impure motive.

Why was He persecuted? Why was He maligned and assaulted and eventually killed? For all the reasons I just mentioned. Because He was righteous in an unrighteous world. He was Light in a world full of darkness and as the Light He exposed the motives and the attitudes and the behavior of those who lived in the darkness. His holiness magnified their sinfulness, and it made them squirm. His righteousness made them feel ashamed, it accentuated their guilt.

And people don't like to feel those things. They will go to great lengths to keep from feeling those things, even if it means trying to extinguish the light. It's one of the oldest reactions in the world.

Cain killed his brother Abel, we are told, because Abel's actions were righteous and his were evil. Abel didn't do anything wrong, and he didn't do anything to Cain, but his actions exposed and magnified Cain's unrighteousness, and Cain couldn't stand it. Somehow he had to alleviate his discomfort—he had to feel better about himself—and so he eliminated the righteousness.

That's why Jesus suffered, and that's why Jesus said those who follow Him would suffer, too. We not only represent Him, we resemble Him. Because of His Spirit who lives in us we act like Him, respond like Him, think like Him, talk like Him. And that makes us vulnerable to opposition and abuse for the same reason that Christ Himself experienced those things.

Jesus said as much in **verse 11**. ***11 “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.***

I believe verse 11 is a further clarification of verse 10. Being persecuted “for righteousness’ sake” and being persecuted “for Jesus’ sake” are essentially the same thing. Righteousness expressed through Christ followers *is* Jesus being expressed through them. And so the reproach and persecution and slander that Christ-followers will experience is the result of their identification with Him.

Do you see how Jesus is clarifying His contemporaries’ perceptions of the kingdom and reshaping their theology? He was saying that the eradication of evil and opposition to God’s people was *not* going to happen suddenly or instantly with the coming of Messiah. Messiah would *not* immediately establish a visible kingdom of comprehensive peace and absolute righteousness. Instead, the emergence of the kingdom was actually going to *generate* a new and different kind of conflict. Not political or military conflict, but moral and ethical conflict. The attitudes and behavior of kingdom people would create tremendous angst in those who didn't belong to the kingdom, and it would cause them to attack kingdom people and vent their hatred and rage upon them.

As I said earlier, this would have been a big surprise to Jesus’ audience. But there is another surprise element in these declarations. Jesus says that those who suffer reproach and persecution *will be blessed*. Literally, “*they will feel fortunate*.” And then Jesus goes on to give an admonition. *“Rejoice and be glad...”* if and when all these terrible things happen to you. How is that even possible?

I believe Peter answers that question in his first letter when he says, ***12 “Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed” (4:12-13).***

Not long after Pentecost, Peter and John were confronted by an angry mob of Jesus-

haters. They commanded them to stop speaking about Jesus and healing people in His name. Peter said, "Sorry, but that's not possible. We cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

The Jewish leaders got so angry they wanted to kill them (5:33), but they settled on flogging them. And after Peter and John had been beaten we are told that they rejoiced *"because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name"* (5:41).

And that's what Peter was talking about in his letter. We can rejoice when we suffer because it is radical identification with Jesus. We are actually participating in His sufferings.

We are told in Acts 9 that a man named Saul of Tarsus was obsessed with terrorizing followers of Jesus, because he thought that Jesus was a fraud, and that the movement called "the Way" was blasphemous. So he appointed himself marshal, formed a posse, and went throughout Palestine hunting down Christians so he could then drag them to Jerusalem, throw them in jail, try them for treason, and punish them severely.

We are told in **Acts 9:3-4**. *As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?"*

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

When Jesus identified Himself to Saul He did *not* say, "Why are you persecuting my followers?" Or, "Why are you persecuting my church?" He said, "Why are you persecuting Me?"

That's what I mean by radical identification. Jesus is so identified with His church that He not only knows and cares what is happening to us, He *participates* in what is happening to us. When we are being persecuted, *He* is being persecuted. When we suffer, *He* suffers.

Before the Apostle Peter died he appointed a man named Ignatius to be bishop of the church in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), where he served in that capacity for forty years. While the Roman emperor Trajan was visiting the region, he arrested Ignatius because he confessed Jesus *alone* as Lord, and not Caesar. The emperor sent him in chains to Rome, where he was hustled to the arena and thrown to two fierce lions who immediately devoured him.

At no time did he try to escape his miserable death. On the contrary, while bound for Rome under armed guard, he wrote a letter to the church in the imperial capitol insisting that no one interfere. He said, *"...nearness to the sword is nearness to God; to be among the wild beasts is to be in the arms of God; only let it be in the name of Jesus Christ. I endure all things that I may suffer together with him."*

If we suffer for His sake we are blessed, because we are identified with Him and Him with us.

But Jesus says that we are not only blessed, but we can rejoice and be glad, for our reward in heaven is great. Jesus is once again clarifying something about the kingdom. There is a stark difference between what citizens of the kingdom experience while living on this earth, and what they experience when they depart this earth and live in heaven. Those who belong to the kingdom can expect that in this earth realm they will be the targets of violent aggression.

Jesus said to His disciples, *"In this world you will have tribulation..."* (John 16:33). Paul said to the church, *"It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him"* (Phil. 1:29).

But one of the dominant themes of the New Testament is that those who suffer for Jesus in this present world will be richly rewarded for it in the world to come. And what is that reward? Again, Peter described it in His first letter. **4:13b**. *“Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”*

His glory being revealed is a reference to Jesus’ Second Coming when He will rise from His throne and descend to earth from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first and then those in Christ who are living on the earth will be caught up in the air to meet Him. And the compensation His followers will receive for their present sufferings is an inexpressible and glorious joy that will never diminish and never end.

The word translated *overjoyed* refers to a steady, persistent joy that is building to a climax. It is churning, effervescing, and when the glory of Jesus is revealed it will erupt like a volcano and keep erupting for all eternity. And Peter says that the anticipation of this overflowing joy that will be ours when Jesus comes ought to make us joyful right now. It’s the joy that comes from hope.

I’m not sure I have ever been truly persecuted or have truly suffered because of my faith in Christ. I’ve been called “judgmental” and “narrow-minded” for some of my convictions, but I’m not sure that counts as persecution. I’ve never been attacked, I’ve never gone to jail, and I’ve never been threatened with death. But I’ve often wondered how I would respond if any of those things happened to me. Could I respond like Jesus, or Peter, or Stephen, or Ignatius? Perhaps you have wondered the same thing about yourself.

I think a lot depends on how much we understand who we are in Christ, and how deeply that understanding has permeated our self-awareness. Do I really believe that I am not my own but I’ve been bought with a price, the precious blood of Jesus? That I am thoroughly *defined* by Christ—not only by what He has done for me but the fact that He now lives in me? Do I really believe that I have been crucified with Christ, and that I no longer live but Christ lives in me, that the life I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved and gave Himself for me (Gal. 2:20)?

I am convinced that the more I know Christ, and the more I realize who I am in Christ, the more likely I will respond like Christ if and when I was persecuted for Him. Indeed, I am convinced I would rejoice when I suffered for Jesus’ sake because I have the privilege of sharing in His sufferings, and anticipating His rich rewards.

“Happy are the Harassed” **Matthew 5:10-12**

Main Idea: Those who are harassed on earth for Jesus’ sake have reason to be happy, because they will be treated like royalty in heaven

Happy are the Harassed (10-12)

Clarifying popular perceptions of the Kingdom

Persecuted for righteousness’ sake (10)
The meaning of righteousness

The reason for persecution

Picked on for Jesus’ sake (11-12)
Radical identification with Jesus

“Rejoice and be glad”

A great reward in heaven
Life on earth and heaven for kingdom citizens

The reward
“Overflowing joy” (1 Pet.4:13)

Enveloped by glory