

“BECAUSE OF ME”
CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION IN THE 21ST
CENTURY WEST

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In the fall of 2021 I was banned from Twitter. The social media behemoth decided that I was not to be allowed in polite society, or at least not as long as I was saying things they did not like. They claimed that I violated their rules, and when I appealed asking them which specific rule, they promptly denied my appeal and refused to tell me which rule. That's because the rule does not exist. Trust me, I've checked. What I did was point out that the gentleman Twitter was celebrating for being the "first woman" something or other was actually a man. I found that absurd and deeply misogynist, and I said so. Twitter counts my "mis-gendering" (otherwise known as "gendering") as being "hateful" or bigoted or something.

In the annals of Christian martyrdom, losing one's Twitter account ranks pretty low on the persecution index. So please don't hear this as me whining for your sympathy or, worse, rabble rousing for the government to step in and tell Twitter who they have to allow on their platform. Indeed, I do not even believe my response to the situation is normative for everybody. They said I could have my account back if only I admit to breaking the rules and delete the Tweet. I think that's a prudential decision and reasonable people might in good conscience choose differently than me. But I personally have a problem with the tiny little disclaimer they place next to the delete button: "By deleting this Tweet you acknowledge that you violated our rules." I don't acknowledge that I violated their rules, so I won't be clicking that particular button.

So I had a modest brush with intolerance, but it did get me thinking about persecution more generally. Obviously, Christians in other places around the globe are constantly facing far more severe forms of opposition; but we should not use that observation to downplay, as so many are apt to do, the very real pressures that exist

in our own place and time. They are nothing to scoff at. We have seen it in the wedding industry—bakers, florists, photographers—and we are bound to see the trend continue into many other professions. How long before Christian medical professionals lose their licenses for not providing hormone treatments to confused teenagers? Or before state bar associations start requiring allegiance to LGBTQ+ causes for lawyers to satisfy their ethics requirements? It does not take a lively imagination to expand this question for virtually every professional discipline. The sexual revolution demands approval, and they aim to get it. It is an “*or else*” proposition.

My listed title at the *Center for Cultural Leadership* is “Senior Scholar of Public Theology.” We are certainly addressing public matters here, and so I think my task now is to do a little theology. So what I would like to do is talk about a little passage of scripture that will no doubt be familiar to all of you. Familiar, yes; but I find that the more I stare at it, the deeper and more unfamiliar and more profound and more convicting it becomes.

The text is Matthew 5:11-12:

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

WHO IS THIS MAN?

The first thing I want you to notice is just how outrageous this statement is. We don’t often notice because as Christians standing 2,000 years downstream from its utterance we lack the context in which it would have sounded outrageous. But the gospel writers tell us again and again that the *people were amazed at his teaching*. If we find ourselves somewhat less-than-amazed, we ought to work a bit harder to hear what they were hearing.

The gospel writers tell us that the reason people were amazed is because he taught “as one having authority, not like the scribes and teachers of the law.” I’m sure you’ve heard the explanations: scribes and teachers were very religious about appealing to traditional authority: e.g., “Rabbi so-and-so says.” Jesus is unlike that, for sure. But I suggest that the outrage of this particular statement has very little to do with Jesus’ lack of footnotes.

No, it is far more amazing than that. And to see it you need to dust off an old logic test you’ll remember from your SAT exam, if you’re of a certain age. They were “Analogy” questions with the format “A is to B as C is to...” So, for example, “Runner *is to* Marathon as... Oarsman is to Regatta.” (By the way, SAT questions like that are the reason why they got rid of the analogy section of the test in 2005: it was deemed to be aimed at economically privileged students. And I can hardly disagree: is anyone outside of the Ivy League familiar with the sport of *crew*? I digress.) In our text Jesus is making analogies—“A is to B as C is to D.” So let’s listen again to Jesus’ statement and do a little analogical exercise:

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Here are some analogies to be drawn from these words of Jesus:

Your relationship to Jesus is the same as that of the prophets of old to God.

Persecution for Jesus’ name is the same (i.e., “in the same way”) as persecution for Yahweh’s Name.

Your great reward in heaven for Jesus’ sake is the same

as the prophets' reward in heaven for Yahweh's sake.

Are you starting to see the drift, yet? Is it starting to sound amazing? If you and I are the *prophets* in this analogy (and do not miss that Jesus draws that continuity explicitly when he calls them the “prophets *who were before you,*”) then who, exactly, is Jesus claiming to be in this analogy? There’s only one possible answer: he is the same Lord, the same Name, the same *Rewarder* for whom the *prophets of old were persecuted*. Jesus is claiming to *be* Israel’s God.

It isn’t the lack of footnotes, brothers and sisters. When you start to wrestle yourself into the sandals of a first-century Jew listening to Jesus of Nazareth, you will start to be amazed as they were. Modern skeptics (even highly learned ones like Bart Erhman) often want you to show them the “verse” where Jesus “claimed to be God.” The truth is that virtually *everything he said was a claim to be God*.

My wife listens to the Bible on audio regularly, and she does so beginning in Genesis all the way through Revelation. After doing this a few times, she noticed something and brought it to my attention. If you listen all the way through the prophets straight into the gospels, there is a massive, tectonic shift that takes place. We miss it because we don’t read our Bibles in a linear way. We “dip into” a Psalm here, a chapter of the prophets there, a gospel reading, an epistle, and so forth. But when you listen straight through it sounds like this:

“Thus says the Lord.”

“Thus says the Lord of hosts.”

“Hear the word of the Lord.”

“The word of the Lord came to me.”

“Thus says the Lord.”

[Page turn to Matthew]

“Truly, truly, I say to you.”

“You have heard it said, but I say to you.”

“Truly, truly, I say to you.”

“Anyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a man who built his house on the rock.”

Do you hear the difference? *The entire Bible shifts from third-person discourse to first-person address.* No longer do we hear the prophet saying “Thus says the Lord.” We hear, “*I say to you.*” Yahweh, the Lord, the God of Israel, has arrived and is speaking directly, without intermediary. It should be no wonder the people were amazed at his teaching. The authority he claimed was *divine* authority.

YOU ARE MY WITNESSES

I’ve already mentioned the continuity that Jesus draws between the prophets of old and his followers, but it is worth lingering over. Jesus says “in the same way they persecuted the prophets *who were before you.*” The difference between Isaiah or Jeremiah and you and me is one of *time* or place in redemptive history. The prophets were not, as we imagine it, some privileged special *class* of their own; according to Jesus, they were simply *before you.*

But can that be true? Prophets were specially called by God. They were enlivened and inspired by the Holy Spirit to speak God’s *literal words.* They possessed judicial authority, prosecuting divine lawsuits against Israel and the nations. They were God’s emissaries and witnesses. Can the same be said of you and me? The answer is an emphatic, Yes! We most certainly *do* have a prophetic vocation.

Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these

things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:47-49).

The Spirit-empowered church explodes out of Jerusalem, the waters overflow Jordan's banks and flood the earth, the old wineskin has burst open by the new wine of Jesus' blood, and his witnesses (literally, *martyrs*) announce the enthronement of the King of kings; they prosecute his lawsuit, bringing conviction of sin, and they offer his extravagant mercy to all the nations. I love how Frodo Baggins put it when he encountered the ruffians ruining the Shire: "The King's messengers will ride up the Greenway now, not bullies from Isengard." *We* are the King's messengers.

Now, to be sure we ought to carefully distinguish between Apostolic gifts and our own vocations. We are not inspired by God in the same way as Peter or Paul, who, carried along by the Holy Spirit, wrote down the "God-breathed" scriptures. We are not part of the foundation laying of the church, as Paul describes it in Ephesians 4, but the building of the structure. But neither should we see some kind of absolute discontinuity. We, too, proclaim the Lordship of Christ, we too are his emissaries and witnesses, we "ride up the Greenway," so to speak, and we do so proclaiming the Lord's Word. When we bear witness to Christ by expounding the Scriptures, we too are speaking God's literal words.

And Jesus says we will be persecuted for it, just as the prophets of old. We ought not be surprised at resistance and persecution. The words of Jesus we are considering just now were spoken at the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. He certainly wasn't hiding what following him would mean. It was all right there in his introduction. But we must not miss that the very core of this teaching is a promise: "*Great is your reward in heaven.*" Again, just an outrageous claim! Who is this man who can promise a final, eternal, everlasting reward in the *heavenly realms* because you suffered for association with his name? If he is a mere man, he is guilty of blasphemous arro-

gance. But he is not a mere man. He is, as Thomas said, “My Lord and my God!” Our text contains in seed form the message Jesus later reveals in full to John on the island of Patmos. The whole of the book of Revelation is about the saints overcoming persecution out of loyalty to King Jesus.

It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son (Rev. 21:6-7).

Jesus can make this promise not only because he is God, but because he is the *God-Man* who himself, “for us and for our salvation” (as the Nicene Creed puts it) overcame death and Hades. His resurrection is the guarantee, and the resurrection Spirit he has poured into our hearts is, Paul tells us, the “down payment guaranteeing our inheritance” (Eph. 1:14).

A KEY WORD

It is a glorious promise, and it is a glorious heritage to be numbered among the martyrs, those who witness to and suffer for the sake of Christ. But there is a very important, easy-to-miss word that Jesus uses. I wonder if you caught it? “Blessed are you,” Jesus says, “when people insult you and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you.” The key word there is “falsely.”

When the world persecutes you, it is vitally important that the insults and accusations of evil are *false*. And I hate to be the bearer of bad news: the church of Jesus Christ—by which I include the institutional church, but also something wider, something like the broader “Christian community”—is failing this metric. Ravi Zacharias was not falsely slandered as a sexual predator. Mark Driscoll was not falsely slandered as an arrogant tyrant. James

MacDonald was not falsely slandered as a profligate bully. Bill Hybels was not falsely slandered as a sexual harasser. Jerry Falwell, Jr. was not falsely slandered as a self-aggrandizing deviant. And many a Roman Catholic diocese were not falsely slandered as dens of pedophilic iniquity. All of those accusations were true. And these examples could, sadly, be multiplied.

Jesus promises great reward in heaven for those who are *falsely* accused of evil on account of his name. And far too many churches and ministries are not suffering for the name of Christ, they are suffering for their evil. They are dragging the name of Christ through the mud because the accusations are true. It is a disgrace. In Revelation 2, Jesus warns the pastor of the church of Ephesus that if he does not repent, his lampstand—his *church*—will be removed. Jesus the High Priest is still trimming the heavenly wicks, and he continues to remove lampstands. Brothers and sisters, I am of the view that the contemporary church is under God's chastisement, and we are in desperate need of repentance and renewal.

That word “falsely” is important on a personal level, too. There is a certain brand of Christian keyboard warrior who behaves like a jerk on social media (I only use that word because this is a family-friendly event) and then claims the mantle of martyrdom when people respond by observing that he or she is, in fact, a jerk. Or I can think of any number of Christian minor online celebrities—oh, why limit it? Major institutions, too—who make it their business model to throw rhetorical bombs in the public square only to then turn around and use the resulting firestorm as a fundraising opportunity to boost their platform. “I’m being canceled for Christ! Send money!” To apply a paraphrase from later in Jesus’ sermon, if your culture warring is done to be seen by men, to boost your platform, to increase revenue, then you will have your reward in full. It will not be the heavenly one. That goes to those *falsely* accused of all kinds of evil.

Paul shows us a different way:

But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in the image of its Creator [...] Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect harmony. (Col. 3:8-14).

Simply put: take care that persecution and suffering really *is* because of Christ, not because of your own fleshly, wicked behavior.

“BECAUSE OF ME”

This leads me directly to a final observation, which I only have time now to briefly sketch. Jesus says we are blessed when insulted, persecuted, and slandered “*because of me.*” Or “on account of me.” Or “for my sake.” This strikes me as having deeply profound implications for our public theology and cultural engagement. There is an ever-present temptation, it seems to me, to distance our moral convictions from the person of—and Lordship of—Christ. After all, we want our views to be heard in a hostile public square. We want them to be convincing even to those who resolutely refuse to listen to or be associated with anything having to do with Jesus Christ.

And so we think it better to talk about our moral convictions in more abstract or broadly palatable ways. Let’s not talk directly about how in Genesis 2 God created male and female and revealed his designs for sexual flourishing; let’s instead make modest biological or scientific arguments or historical ones about how no human civilization has ever before recognized homosexual marriage. Let’s not talk

about the intrinsic dignity and value of human life because of the *imago Dei*; let's find a way to describe it using the anodyne language of biology or natural law or general "human rights" or perhaps just the 3D image of an ultrasound. I am not saying these arguments or tools are illegitimate or worthless—maybe there are situational or tactical reasons for all of them. But I do want you to notice that something very subtle and, left unchecked, spiritually corrosive is happening here: our core moral convictions are being untethered from our public allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, we do not fundamentally care for the unborn because of the biology of conception. We do not fundamentally promote sexual flourishing between husband and wife because of "children's rights." We do not advocate for limited representative government or ordered liberty or equality before the law or due process or free enterprise or whatever else because of our allegiance to something called "natural law" or a "common" or "civil" kingdom or any so-called universal canons of reason. We insist on these things—or at least we ought to—because of our allegiance to King Jesus, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. We have an *Imperial announcement* to make to all worldly powers: *Christos Kurios*, "Christ is Lord!" And I worry that we spend far too much time and effort scraping off the royal seal before we deliver these holy decrees, as though they come from nobody in particular, or as though they are easily discoverable by thoughtful people anywhere who have, as it turns out, no need of good news. That approach might be public, but it isn't public *theology*. Even less is it *Christian* public theology.

As I read Matthew 5:11-12, and I see those three convicting words, "because of me," I find deep within myself the stirring of a new resolve, and I invite you to join me in that resolve if you are so moved: if I am to be insulted and persecuted and slandered and, if the Lord wills, even give up my very life (remote though the possibility may be at present), may it be for nothing less than the sake of *His Name*. I will not go to the guillotine for "natural law" or some so-called ideologically neutral second-order kingdom; I will not burn

at the stake for cold abstractions like science, tradition, history, or even—dare I say?—a political constitution or a national flag. Divorced, untethered, and distanced from the one who gives all those things their ultimate meaning and against whom all those things are measured, the one in whom, Paul says, “all things hold together,” they are but idols: deaf, dumb, and blind. Jesus had the privilege of having the truth written in mockery over his head at his execution: KING OF THE JEWS. May they write the sarcastic, yet truthful, mockery over mine: DISCIPLE OF JESUS. EVEN WHEN HE TALKED ABOUT MORALITY AND SCIENCE AND ECONOMICS AND POLITICS AND ART AND TRADITION AND HISTORY. INCORRIGIBLE FANATIC.

Great is the reward in heaven, we are promised. C.S. Lewis had it right: “Aim at Heaven and you will get Earth ‘thrown in’: aim at Earth and you will get neither.” If we resolve ourselves to aim at heaven in our public engagement then perhaps we ourselves, in some small way, will contribute to the answer to the prayer Jesus taught us to pray in this very sermon, and of which I am reminded every single night by the sweet voice of my seven-year-old daughter: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

