Suffering for being a Christian, then, is normal and we must expect it. Persecution is the common experience of our brothers and sisters throughout the world (1 Peter 5:5), and “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). Followers of Jesus will be blessed by God but hated by the world; there don’t seem to be any exceptions.

It’s difficult to get accurate numbers of Christians who are persecuted for openly professing faith in Christ. A conservative estimate is that nearly four thousand Christians worldwide are killed for their faith each year, or about ten Christians killed every day. Other forms of violence - beatings, abductions, rapes, arrests, forced marriages - are committed against Christians, along with the destruction of over 2,500 Christian properties each year.[[1]](#footnote-1)

For most of us, the cost of following Jesus will not extend to laying down our lives, being imprisoned, or suffering physical violence. But we do hear slanderous things said and false stereotypes applied to Christians, and we face opposition to practicing our faith in public places. It starts small, and it starts early. Maybe we’re ridiculed for saying a prayer before a game, or we pause to consider whether to call it a Christmas Tree or a Holiday Tree.

It seems that when God’s people are cold, confused, and compromised, reflecting little of their Heavenly Parent, the world will ignore them; but when Christians get serious about pursuing righteousness, mercy, purity, and peace, they will get under the skin of godless people and soon find themselves facing trouble. The world tolerates Christians with suspicion at best and persecutes us with hostility at the worst.

So, what do we do when we run into opposition for our faith? It’s the fight or flight question. The easiest way to avoid pain, trouble, conflict, or opposition is to move on whenever it appears; but moving on whenever trouble appears is a formula for continued spiritual immaturity. Nothing of value is ever accomplished without pressing on through difficulty, so we shouldn’t take opposition, pressure, frustration, disappointment, or fear as an indication that it is time to move on. Pastor Peter Marshall said it well: “Oaks grow strong in contrary winds and diamonds are made under pressure.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Jesus acknowledges this when he says, “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep into the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). Notice that Jesus does not say that the world is like a pack of wolves ready to tear you apart, so go ahead and let them do it. Instead, Jesus tells us that, in light of the hostility and danger we will face in the world, we must be wise as serpents – shrewd and ready to speak and act against the threats and dangers we face – and innocent as doves – careful not to speak or act in ways that would unnecessarily provoke others to do us harm.

John Bunyan (1628-1688) lived during the reign of English King Charles II (1660-1685). The king wanted to create one unified church structure throughout the country, based on the Church of England’s rules and prayer book, and with all pastors ordained by Anglican bishops. Ministers, like Bunyan, who refused to submit were known as “nonconformists.”

The authorities arrested Bunyan for preaching to a gathering of believers in November 1660. At Bunyan’s trial, the judge laid out the choices: Bunyan could give up preaching and attend Church of England services, or he would be imprisoned for three months and then exiled from England and risk a public hanging if he returned. Bunyan faced a tough decision. He had a wife and four children to support. He had no obligation to preach and could easily have taken up other work, honoring God with a less public testimony; but Bunyan felt sure that God had called him to preach. So, he replied to the judge: “If I were out of prison today, I would preach the gospel again tomorrow, by the help of God.”[[3]](#footnote-3) That decision kept Bunyan in jail for twelve years, during which time he wrote his classic *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

You might expect a man with courage like this would call others to take the harder path, but Bunyan’s counsel to believers facing harassment is wonderfully tender and spiritually wise. Bunyan wrote: “If it is in your heart to fly, fly. If it is in your heart to stand, stand. Anything but a denial of the truth. He that flies, has warrant to do so; he that stands, has warrant to do so. Yes, the same man may both fly and stand, as the call and working of God with his heart may be.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Bunyan concludes: “There are therefore few rules in this case. The man himself is best able to judge concerning his present strength, and what weight this or that argument has upon his heart to stand or to fly.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Each of us must judge our current situation and decide if we are to stand or to fly. There is precedent for both. But as we judge, we must also remember that great blessing and great reward are often found in the places of greatest difficulty. Nothing good ever comes easily. Jesus calls those who are persecuted for their faith “blessed,” and says that their reward will be great.

John Piper once stated that “America is one of the hardest places in the world to be a Christian.” It sounds strange, but he may be right. The blessings of freedom lead us to expect a comfortable life, and comfort soon produces lethargy of spirit, which, in time, leads to fear and timidity. The result is a steep decline in nearly all Christian denominations in America. Contrast that with Christian churches in China and Africa – places where Christianity is illegal – which are among the fastest growing Christian churches in the world; because they struggle for their very survival, their faith is strong. It is when our loyalty to God is tested, when we are called to account for our belief in Jesus, that our faith becomes real and makes the most sense. It is during those moments of struggle and despair and persecution that our faith sustains us.

We began our study on the Beatitudes with the aim of making progress in the Christian life, and we conclude by seeing how the end takes us back to the beginning. The challenge of overcoming the lethargy that so often holds us back from a wholehearted pursuit of all that Jesus calls us to be brings us back to the place where we began our journey: we don’t have what it takes to do this on our own. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak, and we need God’s help to progress on our Christian journey.

So, welcome back to the first ring! Knowing our need, we become “poor in spirit” and are thrown back in fresh dependence on God. We begin, again, to see and to mourn the compromises of our past life and to submit ourselves with meekness to the will of God even when it is difficult and costly. When these roots are established in our life, they will produce a hunger and thirst for God and God’s righteousness. From this desire, God will bring forth the good fruit of a tender heart filled with compassion, mercy, and forgiveness; a pure heart that wills one thing and pursues holiness, and a peaceable heart that will make it possible for us to be peacemakers in a divided and troubled world. That first ring is within our reach. Grasp it firmly and swing!

Prayer: Lord, You say that following you will lead to rejection by the world. Fill me with courage to speak and live the truth, even when it is not popular or convenient. Today, I choose poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, hunger and thirst for You, mercy, purity of heart, and true peacemaking. Help me, Lord, not to love the world or anything in it (1 Jn.2:15), so that I may love You alone with all my heart, mind, soul and strength. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

**Endure the Cost**

Sunday, November 19, 2017 Matthew 5:10-12

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

The first seven Beatitudes describe the life that God calls us to pursue; the last one describes the outcome of such a life. Jesus tells us that as we pursue a Godly life we will encounter resistance and face persecution from the world, but we will have great reward in heaven.

Persecution for righteousness’ sake began in the first family. Adam and Eve had two sons and, like any other parents, they hoped their boys would grow up to be the best of friends. But Cain fought with his brother and killed him because “his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous” (1 John 3:12). So Abel was killed “for righteousness’ sake.” He died because Cain, whose deeds were evil, hated the light he saw in his brother’s life.

Joseph’s brothers persecuted him, and later, when he pursued purity in the house of Potiphar, Joseph landed in prison (Gen. 37, 39). Moses bore the rejection of the people he led (Ex. 17). Elijah found himself despised and persecuted when he tried to hold the king accountable to God’s ways (1 Kings 18-19). Nehemiah faced opposition and defamation of character. Jeremiah landed at the bottom of a cistern (Jer. 38) and Daniel landed in a lion’s den (Dan. 6). Daniel’s three friends endured a fiery furnace (Dan. 3) for their faithful living.

In the New Testament, John the Baptist lost his head (Matt. 14), Stephen died in a hail of stones (Acts 7), Peter sat in a prison cell (Acts 12; Rev. 1), and John died in exile (Rev. 1). Paul endured a series of persecutions that spanned the entire course of his ministry: floggings, beatings, imprisonment, stoning, shipwrecks, muggings, and execution (2 Cor. 11:16-33).

The antagonism focused on the leaders of the early church spilled over into the lives of its members. To the congregation at Philippi, Paul wrote, “It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (Phil. 1:29). To the church at Thessalonica, Paul wrote, “We ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecution and in the afflictions that you are enduring” (2 Thess. 1:4). And Peter, writing to believers scattered across the Empire, said, “Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it come upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12).

1. Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/> cited in web article, “Christian Persecution,” (quick facts), August 3, 2014, by the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Peter Marshall, from a prayer delivered to Congress on March 12, 1948, *United State Congressional serial set,* issue 11305 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1949), 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. George Offor, “Memoir of John Bunyan,” in *The Complete Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), lxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, or Advice to Sufferers* (1875), reprinted as *Seasonable Counsel to Sufferers*, in *The Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 726. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 726. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)