

It's in times like these, when nothing is certain, when we as a church are unable to meet together, when each day is met with statistics of death rates and infections, when we're isolated and cut off from those around us, that our strength is found in God's promises. When circumstances pull the rug from underneath our feet, and the hardships of life force us into a state of hopelessness, we are reminded that our hope is in God, because his promises are eternal. Deuteronomy 7 says "Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations". Hebrews 13:8 - Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. And so when we read of God's promises in scripture, we have the full, unshakable assurance that they remain in place for us today. So when we read the likes of psalm 55 that says "cast your burden on to the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved", that is a promise that will not be broken. Or Matthew 11, in which the Lord promises us "come to me all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest". These assurances are our strength. There has undoubtedly been times over this past year and beyond that these promises have been my only strength. They are eternal and unchanging, just as God himself is both eternal and unchanging. But what if I told you that among the promises of God, among the assurances that are set in stone, is the promise that you and I, so long as we seek God's will, are going to suffer for our faith. The time will come, sooner or later, that we will be called out and confronted for our love of God, and as we look at this passage I want you to ask yourself, what will you do when that time comes.

At first glance, today's passage is the blueprint of a roaring testimony of God's power to free us from sin and change the lives of even the most hard-hearted and antagonistic men such as Paul. It's a testimony that would remind many of the likes of Billy Graham preaching to the thousands with his voice echoing into the distance in such a manner that commands your attention. But I believe God is calling upon us to meditate over the context of what is being said in this passage. Over the circumstances that Paul has been led to. Moments before his speech, Paul is worshipping in the temple. A group of people that Luke refers to as the Jews from Asia lay their hands on Paul and drag him out of the temple. They falsely accuse him of breaking the mosaic law, they hype up the surrounding crowd and they beat him. It is not until after he is publicly beaten that the Roman soldiers intervene and request to know why this is happening. Unable to gather a single definitive reason among the countless voices screaming false accusations of many different things, the Roman soldiers put Paul in chains and drag him to the barracks for safety. But as he is being dragged away, blood most likely pouring down his face, beaten and bruised, Paul asks for an opportunity to speak to the people. Now Paul is being accused of many different things, the Roman soldier is shocked that Paul can speak Greek because he thought he was an Egyptian assassin, the Jew who originally dragged him out accused him of bringing a gentile, or a non-Jew, into the temple, and when the Roman soldier asked why this was happening, verse 34 says "some were shouting one thing, some another". These countless accusations being held against him but at the end of the day Paul professed to love the Lord Jesus and it offended them. And so Paul asks for an opportunity to speak. Now because all of the accusations being held against him were false, all Paul had to do was plea his case. To defend his innocence, get the facts straight and walk free. He knew right well that the crowd standing in front of him wouldn't be satisfied with having just beat him, they wanted him dead. He even speaks to them in Aramaic, their own language, so they know for sure he is one of their own. And he gives his testimony. He shares how Jesus changed his life. The threat of punishment and death stands before him, he is standing in chains, he is given an opportunity to speak up for himself, and he preaches the gospel. Are you willing to do the same?

The assurance of persecution and suffering for the sake of the gospel is set before us in scripture in two forms, a promise and a command. Firstly the promise. As I said previously, God's promises to his people are eternal and unshakable. Around 700BC, God spoke to his people through his prophet Isaiah and says "What I have said, that I will bring about; what I have planned, that I will do", and so with that in mind, let's take a look at 2 Timothy 3 - "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted". Why so? Why do the people of Jerusalem so passionately despise all that Paul stands for, why is it promised that we as Christians will be persecuted and called out for our faith? Few can put it better than the great preacher Charles Spurgeon, "If you have room for Christ, then from this day forth remember, the world has no room for you". We live in a world that increasingly wants nothing to do with God. That is so blatantly offended by the idea of a sinful and broken world in need of God's saving grace. We must at all times strive to be aware that we as God's children have an enemy. That while God has indeed defeated death, and has won victory over the devil, we are not yet free from sin. Until the Lord comes again there will always be opposition. Satan is doing everything in his power to silence God's church. To make it seem irrelevant, outdated and offensive. We need only to read Ephesians 6 and see that it says "for we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers and authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." The devil is known as the prince of this world because the world is his puppet. And until Christ returns, Satan will use the pressure and intimidation of the world to scare you into denying your faith. Wouldn't that be the sweetest victory for the enemy? Not that we as God's children should suffer, or even die, but that when the spotlight falls down upon us and the world looks us in the eye, we deny Christ. Like a child denying loving or even knowing his own father. And trust me, that time will come. We in this part of the world are so blessed to have the freedom to openly worship Christ. I hear horror stories every day of homes being raided in search of hidden bibles, churches being burnt to the ground, pastors being publicly executed for their faith. Its heartbreaking. It also puts everything in perspective. But we are not one bit exempt from some form of persecution. What we see here in today's passage is Paul being called out. Confronted for his faith. Now that is certainly not something we're unfamiliar with. In fact I want to challenge you this morning. If up until now you have yet to experience any sort of opposition or challenge for your faith, have you considered wondering why that is. Jesus declares that we as Christians are called to be the salt of the earth. To be the light of the world. I'll ask you the same question I've been asked before, if you are put on trial for being a Christian, is there enough evidence in your life to prove you guilty? And if you haven't been given the opportunity to testify to the glory of Christ when confronted, it begs the question, is your faith in Christ your driving force for everything as it should be?

But it is not just promised that we will suffer for the sake of the gospel. Its commanded. In fact Paul himself makes it so clear that in order for us to be called children of God, we must be willing to suffer for Christ's sake. Romans 8 tells us "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him". Why is that? Why is it necessary that we suffer for the gospel and willing accept persecution as christians in order to be called a child of God?

Well i'll ask a question I hope I know the answer to. Are you willing to walk with Jesus? Simple question. No double meaning, no hidden agenda. Are you today, sitting there, willing to walk with Jesus? Because one of the many reasons that God sent his son to Earth was that we may live by his example. Committing your life to Christ is to begin walking down a life-long path.

Persecution Is It Worth It? Acts 21:37-Acts 22-22

A path of faith, discipline, service and devotion. But we have the wonderful assurance that no matter where this path takes us, we will never be the first to walk it. Because anything we experience as a Christian, Christ experienced first.

So we are to follow his example. That is what it means to be Christian, to yearn to be Christlike in all things. And so that means to have a heart for loving and serving others just as Christ did. For prioritising time with the Father in prayer and worship above all just as Christ did. But every Christian knows what was at the end of their path for Jesus. A cross. Persecution. Suffering. We have the beautiful promise that we will never have to experience what it is to be separated from God like Christ was, but if we are to be children of God just as Christ is, we must be willing to face the opposition he did. Matthew 10:24, “a disciple is not above his teacher, not a servant above his master;”. The night before his crucifixion, Jesus knelt in prayer and said “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me, nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done”. Are you willing to walk with Jesus?

The time will come when you are called upon to make a choice. Christ or the world. The world, whether that be a stranger, or even friends and family, will pin you against the wall and ask of you the same question that Peter was asked outside the temple “do you follow Jesus?” and Jesus has prepared us for such a time - “And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God”. But we are to rejoice and give thanks. Because we will never be left to suffer alone. We will never be thrown into the pit and watched from afar. God gave us his Holy Spirit that we would be strengthened and empowered to overcome any opposition the enemy might throw at us. Jesus goes on to say “And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say”. All we need is to have faith that our loving heavenly father will equip us with the confidence and strength we need to overcome anything the enemy throws at us. As we read in 1 John - “greater is he that is in you, than he who is in the world”. This was Paul’s strength as he stood in front of the crowd of people demanding his head. We know from scripture that Paul was so deeply rooted in the spirit, and so was empowered to serve and glorify Christ when the time came. And we too have been given access to such strength. We need only have the faith to ask for it.

J.C Ryle sums it up as follows - “The fear of man is strong, the opposition of this evil world is mighty, the lusts of the flesh rage horribly, the fear of death is terrible, the devil is a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour; but Jesus is stronger than them all”

As we begin this season of lent, and make our way to the cross, ask yourself this question, are you willing to follow Jesus?