

Persecution

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[0 : 00] All right, if you've got a Bible, turn. There's two places we're going to go. We're going to go first to Acts 7, and then we're going to go back a couple of books to Matthew chapter 5. So let's go to Acts 7 first. Acts chapter 7 and verse 54.

So some of the territory covered last week, but we're going to read a little bit beyond where we were last week. So Acts chapter 7 and verse 54. This is after Stephen has given his defense in front of the members of the Sanhedrin. Verse 54. When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Look, he said, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. At this they covered their ears and yelling at the top of their voices. They all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And then he fell on his knees and he cried out, Lord, do not hold the sin against them.

When he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul approved of all their killing, sorry, Saul approved of their killing him. On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. Now I want you to flip back a few books to the first book in the New Testament, Matthew's Gospel and chapter 5 and verse 10. This is right at the very beginning of Jesus teaching the famous Sermon on the Mount. Matthew chapter 5 and verse 10. He says these words.

He says, Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 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. This is the word of the Lord.

Let's pray. Let's ask for God's help. Gracious God, won't you teach us this morning? Help us to look into your word, to understand its truth, and to have its truth imprinted upon our hearts. We want to know Christ and be like Christ. And so we ask that you might be pleased to do that special work in us by your spirit this morning through your word. And we ask this for Christ's sake and his glory. Amen.

[3 : 21] And we're actually at the end of a section of the book of Acts, and we're not going to return to Acts until 2026 now from this Sunday onwards, because there's a bunch of different things going on, and we're hoping to actually do a series that we planned a long time in advance on the doctrine of worship.

We did the doctrine of the church about a year and a half ago, and we felt we wanted to do doctrine of worship, what it is we do when we worship God. So we're going to be doing that for most of the rest of the year, and then there'll be Christmas and that, which comes more quicker than we think. And so we felt this was a really good space to sort of stop Acts as they now move on beyond the city of Jerusalem because of persecution, as you saw in that passage, and then start the second section in the second part, in the first part of next year. But then I thought what we should do this morning is, well, we touched on persecution at the beginning of June in this series when the apostles were dragged before the Sanhedrin. But I want to double click on the subject as we close this section out, because it's so prominent in the book of Acts. It's all over the book of Acts. And to help us think through it, what I'm trying to do this morning is I want to apply Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount that we just read to what we're seeing unfold in the story of Acts, and then even to our own experiences, or maybe lack thereof, of persecution. Now persecution is

complicated to talk about in a place like South Africa, where we have very high levels of religiosity, very little outside regulation or interference or opposition. In that sort of environment, I think, especially when you're reading a book like Acts, where persecution comes up over and over and over again, it's a legitimate question to ask, well, do I actually suffer persecution? And then maybe the follow-up and more uncomfortable question that comes is, what if I don't? What does it say about my spirituality? And so by tracking Jesus' words and what we've already seen in Stephen and his death and in some of the other persecution in Acts,

I think we can answer some of those questions. So here's where we're going to go this morning. Three things I want you to see. I want you to see the nature of persecution. I want you to see the test of persecution. And I want you to see the joy of persecution. The nature, the test, and the joy of persecution. If you're wondering which part of your Bible to keep open, where we're going to be, keep the Matthew part open. We'll be there more than the Acts part. So here's the first one, the nature of persecution. Let me take you there to Jesus' words. This is verse 10. He says, blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Now these words come at the end of a long list of blessings that Jesus pronounces that are famously called the Beatitudes. And many of these Beatitudes, if you read them, they're pretty counterintuitive.

[6 : 29] That is, they're sort of upside down in terms of their values that they present when you compare them to the values in the way we just think about life in this world. So things like, you're blessed if you're spiritually poor. Or the meek are going to inherit absolutely everything. Or the hungry and the thirsty are the ones who are going to be filled in the end. All of those are pretty counterintuitive statements, but none more so than this last one. This last one is probably the most counterintuitive of them all because he says, blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. In other words, you are blessed if you get it in the neck for doing what's right. Now for a moment, just suspend everything you've ever been taught at church about persecution or at Sunday school, or if you've heard about missionaries or people like that suffering persecution. Suspend everything you know theologically about persecution and just think, how is there any blessing in a situation where someone gets persecuted for doing what is right?

The person who's doing what is right, they're getting it in the neck like we said. They're not having a good experience. And the person who's doing the persecuting, they're involved in an act of unrighteousness. So they're doing something wrong. So really nobody's winning.

It's a lose-lose game all around. Where is it that you can look at a situation like that and say, well there's blessing in that situation? Think about Stephen in Acts. He is horribly and painfully killed. His public preaching is just getting started and now it's cut out and stopped, put to an end. And then those that kill him, they just get further entrenched in the very sin that's the biggest problem they've had. They've just killed his master and now they're killing him.

So they're just getting deeper and deeper into their own sin. And you look at that whole situation and you say, how is there any blessing in this situation? What does Jesus know about the nature of persecution in this world that makes sense of that statement that to be persecuted for righteousness is to be blessed? Notice a couple of things here. First thing, notice the breadth of the persecution that Jesus has in mind. So this is the only beatitude out of the eight beatitudes that are there that gets expanded. He double clicks on this and we get two extra verses of explanation, which you don't get for all the other ones. And in that explanation we find some pretty revealing information.

Verse 11, blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. So right there he expands persecution. Probably broader than sort of our traditional understandings of persecution. Because I think traditional view is Christians being thrown to the lions, Nero using Christians as human torches to light up his garden. Those are the sort of things we think persecution, if you've been in Christian circles and you've heard those stories, you've been taught about them. We think physical persecution, people being shot, people being killed, people being imprisoned, people being beaten. But Jesus deliberately seems to expand beyond that here because he expands it to what we might call ostracizing, to social persecution that involves words.

[9 : 58] Assail this not in any way to diminish the severity of physical persecution. It's pretty important that we keep one eye on that all the time. It's really important that we have organizations,

maybe you've heard of them before, but an organization like Open Doors that highlights some of the very brutal physical religious persecution that does still take place today in our world. That we don't live kind of closeted away from that and not know what other Christians are facing in other parts of the world.

Christians living in places like North Korea, in places like northern Nigeria, several other places are experiencing significant persecution to this very day. In fact, it's possible to make a case, and there's a lot of really good data to bear this out, but it's possible to make a case that the very worst persecution that Christians have faced in human history has been in the last 100 years.

And it's still going on right now. So I don't want to downplay the horrific physical persecution that is endured by Christians around the world today. But the Bible must also point us to see persecution in a broader sense as well, because that's what Jesus does. Which means, I think, for Christians living in Cape Town, persecution is actually a real thing. Because there is ostracizing. There is a level of social persecution. I would say it's still relatively mild. It's social, rather than sort of state-sanctioned.

But I would say it is there. That's the first thing just to think about, the breadth of the definition. Second thing to notice is that Jesus is speaking about being persecuted for righteousness, he says. Not for being stupid or unwise. For righteousness. Don Carson, who's a New Testament professor, writes on the Sermon on the Mount, and he comments on this verse, and he says, This final beatitude does not say blessed are those who are objectionable, or because they rave like wild-eyed fanatics, or because they pursue some religio-political cause.

[12:09] And it's important to say that it's really of no credit to you, no blessing. That's what we're after here, in the beatitude. It's of no blessing to you for being persecuted, for being obnoxious, with your faith, or for kind of lacking in tact, or for just failing to apply wisdom in a situation.

The apostle Peter actually explicitly says this. He says, in his letter, he says, How is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? And the answer that he's looking for there is, well, it's not to your credit. It's not to your credit. And so we've got to be clear here. This is persecution for righteousness' sake.

Alan Noble is a professor at Oklahoma Baptist University. He's a very thoughtful writer on church and cultural issues, particularly. And a few years ago, he wrote an article in Atlantic where he said this. He said, persecution has an allure for many evangelicals. In the Bible, Christians are promised by St. Paul that they will suffer for Christ if they love him.

But especially in contemporary culture, it's not clear what shape that suffering will take. Narratives of political, cultural, and theological oppression are popular in evangelical communities. But these are sometimes fiction or deeply exaggerated non-fiction, and only rarely accurate. This is problematic. If evangelicals want to have a persuasive voice in a pluralist society, a voice that can defend Christians from serious persecution, then we must be able to discern accurately when we are truly victims of oppression and when this victimization is only imagined.

So kind of per my first point, we need to understand the breadth of persecution broadly as Jesus defines it and describes it. But at the same time, then, be very careful not to overplay that.

[14:08] Or exaggerate it or create some sort of persecution complex in environments where persecution, though it exists, is not particularly severe. So just one example of this growing up, and I wonder what the situation is like now. I don't, I suppose it's probably a long issue now, but I just always remember when you had the public schools slowly not saying the Lord's Prayer or something in assembly after a while, and the Christian community throwing their toys out the cot and going, persecution, persecution, persecution.

And I wonder about that. I wonder about when we cry persecution in environments like that, whether we denigrate the experience of real persecution for righteousness that's taking place. We've got situations where, sure, we're losing, Christianity is losing social, cultural capital, but that's very different from people overtly attacking us for the sake of righteousness.

Like Alan Noble says in that article, it weakens our advocacy on behalf of the truly persecuted. We've got to be very clear about that, about verse 10. It's persecution for righteousness' sake, the text says.

Third thing to think about, there's even more to the nature of persecution. And that is if you think about the word righteousness. By using that word righteousness in verse 10 there, you might ask, well, does Jesus just mean being persecuted for doing good in general, any just thing, pursuing justice in general, and it goes bad for you, is that persecution?

[15:51] I would argue that verse 11 suggests it's a bit more nuanced than that. Because Jesus says, you're blessed if you're persecuted for me, in verse 11. So because you're following me, because you are a Christ follower, and you're pursuing righteousness.

So if you take that into account, and you take everything we've just said into account right now, I think the nature of persecution according to Jesus ranges from severe physical violence and death, on the one hand, to social ostracizing, on the other hand, all for the sake of following Christ in righteous living.

Those are the three components there. The breath, following Christ, righteous living. That's how you build your definition, I think, of what he means by persecution. On that definition, I think it means that persecution is a very real issue then, for us, to talk about in our context.

It's not just something that's far removed from us in a place like North Korea, or in some segment that's still under the control of the Islamic State, or something like that. It's here, in Cape Town.

Now here's the first implication, and this is our second point. The test of persecution. Persecution, in part, provides a litmus test for spirituality.

[17:18] Let me explain what I mean by that. Notice that the promise for those being persecuted is actually the same as the promise you get at the very first beatitude.

Those who are poor of spirit. The first beatitude and the eighth beatitude have the same promise. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven. It's almost like an identity marker.

Essentially saying, Jesus is saying, it's a good indication that you are part of the kingdom if you're persecuted. And that's why you can say you're blessed.

Now he's not crazy, he's not deluded, he's not a masochist. There is blessing. You're blessed because it's a sign, well it's a sign that you're approved by God. You're part of his kingdom.

The presence of persecution, rightly defined, as we've just tried to define it, can be an indication of an act of faith in Jesus Christ. Now you certainly see this if you think about Stephen and what we saw last week.

[18:21] and you see his behavior all the way through his trial and even into his death. I think this point unsettles us. It unsettles a lot of us because the question you all have to ask is, am I experiencing persecution?

Have I? In the past? And if not, what does that say about my spirituality? The depth of my spirituality? So we can get a little bit anxious now if we start to say, well persecution might be a litmus test for spirituality.

You come to a passage in the New Testament like 2 Timothy 3.12, Paul says, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. And you read that and you go, well am I? Am I experiencing persecution? If not, is that because I'm not living a godly life? Am I living an ungodly life? Is Paul just saying that because that was his experience of the world at the time? I mean, the Jews thought Christianity was a blasphemous sect, so obviously they had a reason for wanting to damage Christians around them, stamp it out. The Romans were just violent and antagonistic towards it, so there was a context there.

[19:34] Is Paul just saying that because that's what he experienced on a day-to-day basis? All the godly Christians he knew got persecuted. So is he just saying, well this is just what I observe, or is he putting that out there as a general principle that applies to all Christians at all times?

What would we say to that? First of all, I think we need to remember, and this is going back to the previous point, we need to remember how Jesus views persecution. It is broad. It extends from violent physical persecution to milder social sidelining.

And so, if you're going to use your own experience of persecution as a litmus test for your spirituality, you've got to keep that broad range in mind, first of all. Second though, if you think about it, and if you think about what Jesus says, what Paul says, it's relatively logical and unsurprising in some ways.

Jesus says, you are blessed and your identity as a member of the kingdom is marked up when you are persecuted for that which is right. Now the fundamental teaching of the Bible, Christianity 101, is that after the fall, this is the third chapter in the Bible, you don't have to read very far before you get this, third chapter in the Bible, when Adam and Eve turned away from God, humanity collectively entered into a state of unrighteousness.

Righteousness left the building. It's like we're done, we're gone now. And so what we have, what we live in, is an environment, whether you're in a violent, oppressive, anti-Christian country, or you're

here in Cape Town, we live in an environment where every single person around you and every social or political or legal or ideological system around you is tainted by unrighteousness.

[21 : 26] That's Christianity 101. Unrighteousness is everywhere in this world. In our most sophisticated and developed and open societies and in our most cruel and oppressive societies.

Now into a world like that, the biblical world that's described, you insert a person who gets converted and decides to trust Jesus and now slowly starts to bring something of that righteousness with them as they start to think and behave in ways shaped by the kingdom.

What's going to happen when you insert that person into this world? Conflict's going to happen. Inserting righteousness into a world of unrighteousness is going to get you conflict.

Insert a spark of life into a world of death, you're going to get conflict. Those of you who have listened to a lot of my preaching over the years know that I never pass up a good opportunity to speak about the zombie apocalypse.

If you watch movies about zombies, as I do, you watch *The Walking Dead* or *28 Days Later* or *World War Z* or anything like that, you'll notice that there's often these scenes where you've got all these zombies now.

[22 : 46] They're dead but they're alive again and they all walk around and they all basically mind their own business when they're all together by themselves. They're all pretty clumsy and slow and they walk around but in the minute you put a person who's not dead in the midst of them, what happens?

They suddenly turn and go wild and tear that person to pieces eating them up, right? Now that's a little bit what it's like when you insert righteousness into a crowd of unrighteousness.

The unrighteousness turns on the righteousness. A big caveat here on my illustration, very big caveat. If you come to faith in Jesus Christ and you start to live out this righteousness, people are probably not going to try and bite your arm off.

That's because in this world we are not all as unrighteous as we possibly could be. We are unavoidably tainted by unrighteousness according to the Bible, every single part of us but thanks to the common grace of God in this world, thanks to us being made in the image of God, unrighteousness is to some extent restrained by God in this world and we are not as evil as we possibly could be.

So the mob is probably not going to jump on you and devour you if you profess faith in Jesus. Although in some countries that is not the case. For some Christians that is a reality.

[24 : 18] The mob does turn on you and tries to tear you apart. They did that to Stephen. It's important that when we discuss these more moderate forms of persecution, we recognize that brutal persecution that does take place in some parts of the world.

For some people turning to Christ is to have the entire community turn upon you in violence. But whether you're in that harsh environment or you're in Cape Town, when you insert righteousness into a world that is soaked by unrighteousness, you will inevitably get conflict.

Now why will that happen? Why conflict? Well because genuine righteousness by its very nature condemns unrighteousness. And there's always going to be a pushback to that.

There's always going to be a backlash and a resistance to that. See when you live out your life consistently as a Christian and you put this new way of living out there even without being obnoxious about it, it serves as something of a judgment on the old way.

Or the way that everybody else is going about living their lives. So let me give you an example of this. Say you're sitting around at work with some unbelieving colleagues and you're having a conversation together and one of them mentions how they occasionally fudge their tax returns and don't declare the extra income that they get from the granny flat that they have on their property.

[25 : 52] And then one or two of the other colleagues who are talking they start sharing some examples of how they've skipped around tax a little bit in some dubious ways and they all moan and complain together about how the government is taxing the middle class too much.

And then they turn to you and say hey Bob, that's your name in this illustration, how about you? How much have you been hiding from the tax man?

And now you trying not to be confrontational, trying not to rustle any feathers, you say I don't fudge my tax returns, I declare all my extra income.

And they say well why do you do that? And you say well I'm a Christian, I don't think it's right to not declare extra income, I think it's right to follow the law of the land.

What happens to the mood of that conversation? If it was fun and upbeat at the beginning, what is it like now? Now see there, you haven't tried to condemn them, but you have condemned them.

[27 : 06] You can't help it. Righteousness must condemn unrighteousness. When the two come together, it's not necessarily that you and your person are going out there with an agenda to directly condemn other people, it's the righteousness condemning the unrighteousness.

And so we are always going to get pushback whether we live in an atheistic fascist state or whether we live in the Bible belt, we are always going to get pushback when righteousness conflicts with unrighteousness.

You cannot avoid that conflict. In fact, the only way you can avoid it is to ditch righteousness. That's the only way to avoid it. the only way you can avoid it is to throw it away.

And sadly, Christians do do this often. To use that illustration I've just mentioned, I've actually encountered several church-going folk over a decade and a half of ministry who have not even blinked an eyelid as they've told me, their pastor, about how they have, in less than honest ways, avoided the tax man.

And that's just a very mild thing, you might say. There are many other examples. Throw righteousness out, you won't have any conflict. And so that's why we can say that persecution then is, I think, a litmus test for spirituality.

[28 : 23] Because when there is no conflict in your life between righteousness and unrighteousness, when there is no conflict, when that conflict is completely absent, it might just mean that the righteousness that comes from faith is completely absent to.

That's a scary thing to face up to this morning. You might need to face up to the truth that there is no conflict between righteousness and unrighteousness in your life because you have not really embraced by faith the life of righteousness that comes from believing and following our Lord Jesus Christ.

And if it is you, I want to say this morning, do business with God. Repent of that. Repent of that situation and say, Lord, help me seek and pursue righteousness. Now, final point here, the joy of persecution.

This is the most counterintuitive part of the entire reflection upon persecution. So Jesus says this in verse 12, Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven. For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

He says, be joyful about your persecution. Why? Well, because your reward in heaven is great. Now, I want to be clear, he's not calling us to be masochists, running around looking for persecution, getting some sort of twisted kick out of it.

[29 : 51] What he is saying is that when persecution does happen, because of righteousness, because you're following him, be joyful in the depths of your soul, not downcast, not despairing, joyful.

See, because if you're sharing in the persecution that comes with living a kingdom life, it's probably a testimony then that you are also sharing in the reward of kingdom life that will be coming.

The eternal life of the new creation. That is Jesus' reasoning to you. That's what he's saying to you. That's what you're getting. If you're sharing in the one, you're also going to be sharing in the other. So rejoice, he says. You've got great reasons to rejoice. It's a very real sense in which persecution in the kingdom economy is a sign of triumph.

It is a sign of victory. The experience of it, within the bounds of the definitions we've just given, is an experience of victory. A tasting of victory and triumph.

[30 : 54] As weird as that sounds. Look at Stephen in Acts. He's covered in blood. He's on the receiving end of all sorts of hatred.

And he's praying for mercy. Not for himself, but for his executioners. You look at Stephen doing that in that scene, in that story, and you think, you know what, there's actually only really one winner here.

And that winner is Stephen. Because to be able to respond in that moment the way that he does, to be able to face death in the sort of psychological and emotional contentment and resolve that he does means that he has somehow won at life.

He has somehow found something in life that all of us sitting here this morning would desperately like to have. Is that not true?

To be able to do what he does? To be able to say what he does? To be able to pray what he does? In the circumstance in which he does it means he has won at life. He has found the thing that all of us are every single day desperately looking for.

[32 : 15] It's a triumph. It's a triumph.

He trumpeted his own victory. How did he do that? By dying on a cross. By allowing himself to be the victim of intense persecution. That is the moment of his greatest triumph.

And it is so completely counterintuitive to how we think about this world. The king who brought us life by his death. The king who gave us spiritual riches by his physical poverty.

the king who gave us triumph through a moment of agonizing defeat. That king on the Sermon on the Mount turns to you and me and he says if you're being persecuted because of me you are blessed.

You've won. You're triumphing. Rejoice that you are part of this upside down kingdom because one day you'll get it all in its fullness he says. Now the problem we have, the problem you have, the problem I have is fear.

[33 : 48] It's fear. Because this is such a hard call. The blessing is incredible. We all want it but it's such a hard call. And so in our timidity we are tempted towards unrighteousness.

We give up on Jesus' kingdom living. We hide from it, from everyone for fear of the hardship that it might bring us. We do this in different ways collectively.

Partly based on our temperament, partly based on other things. Some of us withdraw from the culture. Even whole religious groups tend to do this sometimes. We withdraw from the culture so we hide our Christianity, we hide our faith, we put it under a cover.

If nobody knows about it we won't get hurt. There's never going to be a clash between righteousness and unrighteousness if we keep our righteousness behind closed doors. We could do that in some ways.

We could just keep this group together. Don't let anybody in. Keep a blank face when you go out there into the world and then practice your Christianity in here when you come in these four walls.

[34 : 49] Some people do that. Some people try and overpower the culture. And they think, look, if we can legislate our righteousness everywhere, take over cultural institutions, then we won't have to worry about persecution.

Why? Well, because we'll be in control. This has been a major strategy of what we might call the religious right in many places around the world. Both of those are actually fear responses.

They're both driven by fear. They're both attempts to minimize the impact of righteousness coming into a fallen and broken world and the conflict and the upheaval that that will naturally bring.

And so they're both actually driven by fear. Avoiding persecution through cultural control is a response to fear. Avoiding it through cultural abandonment is a response to fear.

How do we not fear? How do we not fear? One of the most famous persecution martyrdom stories in Christian history is the story of Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley.

[35 : 56] In 1553, they were both burnt at the stake for their Protestant faith under the reign of Mary Tudor. She was the original Bloody Mary. Latimer and Ridley were two of the three Oxford martyrs, the third one being the Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, who were put to death.

In Oxford today, there's a site where they were burned in front of Balliol College. There's still a little granite cross in the pavement. Now Ridley was a younger man.

Hugh Latimer was an older man, older established Christian. He'd been a Christian for a very long time. And as the flames were getting lit, Ridley starts to show some fear.

He starts to panic in the face of the horror that he's about to endure. And very, very famously, Latimer turns to Ridley and he says, these words are hard for me to say, but he says, Be of good courage, Master Ridley, and play the man, for we shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England as I trust shall never be put out.

Can you imagine that moment? How powerful that moment must have been?

[37 : 17] That dramatic moment? And I think the question for you and me as we wrestle with fear is, who is our Latimer? Who's going to say that to us? Who's going to stand with us in the fire and encourage us?

Well, Stephen, when he's dying, he looks up and there's somebody there standing with him in the fire. Someone who has endured the fire for his sake.

Someone who has lost his life in the pursuit of righteousness. Someone who suffered at the hands of violent persecutors. Someone who secured our heavenly blessing by coming under the curse that we deserve for our own sin.

And so friends, if you this morning, if you're fearful, if you're weak, if you dread the flames of persecution, if you are desperately needing to be of good courage, then look to Christ. Look to the comfort of his gospel word. His sacrificial death on the cross is the very bold, very courageous, very comforting word that we need this morning.

[38 : 32] And let that comforting word from the cross banish fear from your hearts. Fill it up instead with love. The old King James version of 1 John 4 says, perfect love casteth out fear.

The cross is that word of perfect love to you and to me. Jesus and his love on the cross is your Latimer this morning.

Standing beside you in the fire saying, be of good courage. Be of good courage. know that when this world rubs up against righteousness in you, that you are sharing in the righteousness of Christ. You are sharing in his life. You are sharing to some extent in his death. You're tasting something of that. And you will share in his victory.

And rejoice, Jesus says, and be glad for great, great, great, great is that victory. Let's pray together. Father, teach us, teach us how love casts out fear.

[39 : 51] Teach us how the love of Christ might cast out our fear. As we seek to live lives of righteousness in a world of unrighteousness. We know, we instinctively know that should we take our faith seriously and step out into the public realm, that conflict will come.

And so we ask that you strengthen and encourage us for that. By forcing our gaze upon Christ and his love. Lord, I pray for any person in this church, maybe this morning, who's facing significant opposition in their life because of their Christian faith.

Maybe it's from family, maybe it's from friends, maybe it's in the workspace. I pray that you would encourage them this morning, that they would feel strengthened for the fight. I pray for those of us who are living lives of comfort and ease because we are avoiding righteousness.

I pray that you would bring them to a place of repentance this morning. Help us in this area, Lord. It's really hard. Help us. Father, maybe there's a person here who's not a believer who's saying, well, why would I even follow Jesus then if this is what's going to be my lot in life?

And I pray that you, by your spirit this morning, would show them that the love that comes from the cross is greater than any discomfort we can endure in this life. We ask this over Christ's sake and his glory.

[41 : 25] Amen. Amen.