

How To Thrive In Persecution

Acts 4:1-37

Richard Tow 7-5-15

In Matt 5:10-15 Jesus said, *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. 13 You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”*¹

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made statements that were contrary to conventional wisdom. This is one such statement. *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake....”* This is not the way people naturally think. Conventional wisdom says you are blessed and happy when everybody likes you and speaks well of you; you are accepted and respected by your peers; people admire you and want to be friends with you. That's a sign of blessing.² And there are times when God gives us favor with people in order to position us for His purposes and enable us to fulfill a mission. As a child and young adult Jesus had that kind of favor. The Bible says He increased in favor with God and men.³ But when He later confronted leaders with truth, they rejected Him and persecuted Him even unto death.

It is important to note this qualifier in Matthew 5:10 *“...for righteousness sake....”* There is no blessing in being persecuted for personal stupidity or abrasiveness. The persecution some people experience is simply the result of how they are treating other people. If we are disrespectful toward people in our words and actions, they will probably be disrespectful toward us. If we rob banks and take other people's money, we will probably be persecuted, but rightly so. Persecuted *“for righteousness sake”* means it comes because of your commitment to Christ.

The decision made by the Supreme Court on June 26th positions Christians for a level of persecution that we have not experienced in America up until this time. More than ever before, we need a biblical understanding of persecution and how to deal with it. That is my subject this morning.

In Acts 4 we see the Early Church dealing with their first wave of persecution. In the first three chapters of Acts they had some awesome experiences in God. The Day of Pentecost came and they will all filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter preached and 3,000 people got saved. Acts 2:46-47 gives us a sense of what was happening. *“So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”* So there they were have a wonderful time in God, *“praising God and having favor with all the people.”* That's the kind of church I want to join. It gets even better in Acts 3. Peter and John are on their way to the Temple and God heals a crippled man right there for everyone to see. Five thousand people get saved (Acts 4:4).

But something else happens. Follow with me as we read Acts 4:1-8 *“Now as they spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, 2 being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. 3 And they laid hands on them, and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. 4 However, many of those*

¹ All Scripture quotes are in New King James Version unless indicated otherwise.

² In Luke 6:26 Jesus even said, *“Woe to you when all men speak well of you, For so did their fathers to the false prophets.”*

³ Luke 2:52

who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand. And it came to pass, on the next day, that their rulers, elders, and scribes, 6 as well as Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the family of the high priest, were gathered together at Jerusalem. 7 And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, 'By what power or by what name have you done this?' 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit...."

Six principles for thriving in persecution:

I. Stay Filled with the Holy Spirit.

Peter's ability to deal with this situation depended upon that more than anything else. You see this theme of staying filled with the Spirit over and over as they walk through persecution. Let me just highlight a few verses with you. When the authorities release Peter and John they go back to the church; everybody prays; and Acts 4:31 says, "*And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.*" We're being informed by Scripture as to how they were able to cope with the stress. When Stephen was being stoned, Acts 7:55 says, "*But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.*" "*But he, being full of the Holy Spirit...*"

This is going to be crucial for you and me in the days ahead. A Spirit-filled Church is something the devil cannot handle. 1 Cor 3:19 "*For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, 'He catches the wise in their own craftiness.'*" Every attack of the enemy, God will turn upside down on Him, if we will stay full of the Holy Spirit, and let Him call the shots. Isa 55:8-9 "*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts.*"

This is not a time to lean upon our own understanding and simply try to figure out what to do. This is a time to press into God and get full of the Holy Spirit. Then, by the Spirit, we will know what to do. Listen to the instruction Jesus had given the disciples in Matt 10:16-20 "*Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. 17 But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. 18 You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. 19 But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; 20 for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.*"

That is exactly what is happening to Peter here in Acts 4. The Holy Spirit tells him how to answer these rulers and it was highly effective.

With the infilling of the Holy Spirit came the courage to say what needed to be said. Peter could not have done that in his own strength alone. He proved that when he denied Christ three times before the crucifixion. But here Peter is, bold as a lion, because he is full of the Holy Spirit.

How to thrive in persecution: perhaps the most important thing is to stay full of the Holy Spirit. That enables us to do #2.

II. Stay Truthful in your Testimony.

Do not water it down to accommodate the crowd. Speak the truth in love. Never be "mean-spirited." We are sent as "*sheep*" among wolves. We are to be "*wise as serpents and harmless as doves.*" We have to learn how to be firm in our convictions without attacking our accusers or threatening others. Daniel is a good example of this when he faced the lion's den. He made no threats to those who were trying to destroy him. He gave them very little of his attention. He had made a decision about what he would do. He had drawn boundaries that preserved his right to do right. He was immovable in that and willing to take whatever the consequences might be. But he didn't try to force everybody else to do right. He

simply refused to do wrong himself. In a conference discussing the pending the Supreme Court decision on gay marriage, Matt Staver, founder of Liberty Counsel, made a significant observation. Comparing *Roe v Wade* to the Gay Marriage case, he said “The difference is *Roe* was a wrong decision that resulted in a loss of life but people were not forced to participate. With this issue, people will be forced to participate and affirm it.”⁴ We need to clearly understand that difference. Its one thing for a pagan society to pass a law that allows wicked people to do wicked things. It’s something very different when a law is imposed that forces godly people to do wicked things. This is why God honored the civil disobedience of the midwives in Egypt. Were they disobeying the law of the land? Yes, they were. But they were willing to risk their own lives rather than participate in an evil act of murdering Hebrew children.⁵ This is a key criterion for civil disobedience. And this line is being crossed now.

Acts 4:8-12 *“Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, ‘Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: 9 If we this day are judged for a good deed done to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, 10 let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. 11 This is the ‘stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.’ 12 Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”*

I want to point out two characteristics of Peter’s answer. First, he used the occasion as an opportunity to preach the gospel. *“Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among me by which we must be saved.”* The accountability of each and every one of those priests and rulers who were questioning Peter just went way up. He told it to them like it is. Jesus is the only way of salvation. Secondly, he did not tone down the message to accommodate their likes and dislikes. I’m hearing national preachers squirming when asked if Jesus is the only way of salvation. “Well God loves everybody and He will work it out. We love everybody and we just want everyone to know that God loves them.” Nice, generic talk to avoid the question. Peter did not avoid the question. They asked by what authority he does these things and he gives a forthright, straight answer.

We’ve got too many politicians in the pulpit and not enough prophets. We’ve got too many people who don’t want to offend the gays, don’t want to offend the Muslims, trying to appear so nice that they’re on everybody’s side. I wonder how Peter would answer questions about the sin of homosexuality. I wonder if he would follow modern preachers who carefully phrase things so as to not offend anyone. Notice what he says to these rulers in Acts 4:10, *“Let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified....”* “...whom you crucified...,” surely there was a less offensive way for Peter to say that. “Well, I know you had good intentions, but some things didn’t turn out real good; I’m not saying it was your fault because I love everybody and I really want us to get along.” No, there are some issues more important than getting along. And if the only way you can understand my position is for me to give it to you that straight, then here it comes.

The results of Peter’s forthright, truthful answer can be found in Acts 6:7 *“Then the word of God spread, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.”* Those priests were people Peter is talking to in our text. Now the High Priest didn’t get saved and a lot of others just hardened their hearts. But by setting aside his concerns for his own safety and proclaiming truth in a straightforward manner, many priests got saved.

You don’t do people a favor by accommodating their sin. The first step toward salvation is recognizing your need for salvation. If there is no sin, there is no need for a Savior to save us from our sins. Peter

⁴ James Robinson quoting Matt Staver, “James Dobson, Rick Scarborough, Mat Staver Address Supreme Court Same-Sex Marriage Threat,” <https://stream.org/james-dobson-rick-scarborough-mat-staver-address-supreme-court-same-sex-marriage-threat/> accessed 5-15-15.

⁵ Exodus 1:15-21.

pointed out the guilt of these rulers. Homosexuality is sin. Adultery is sin. Fornication is sin. Lusting in the heart is sin. Justifying those sins lead people down the wrong path. Rom 3:20 says "...by the law is the knowledge of sin." When I'm told that my sexual behavior outside the covenant of marriage is sin—when I'm told that the law declares homosexuality an abomination—when I'm told the law declares adultery as sin—when I'm told that stealing can invoke a curse on my life—then I am awakened in conscience and can come under the conviction of the Holy Spirit. In that state of conviction, I can confess my sin and repent and be forgiven.⁶ If the sin is never acknowledged, that whole process is aborted. Rom. 7:7 "*What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, 'You shall not covet.'*" The devil has convinced Christians that calling sin sin will offend people and therefore we will not win them to Christ. That is not a biblical idea. The law was given to awaken a sinner conscience to his need for the cross. 1 Tim 1:8-11 "*But we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully, 9 knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, 10 for fornicators (pornos), for sodomites (, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine, 11 according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God which was committed to my trust.*" The correct use of the law is to help sinners see their need for forgiveness—which is only available through the cross of Christ. So why does the Devil want us to stop call homosexual behavior a sin? He does not want those people saved. If there is no sin, there is no need for a Savior. If there is no need for a Savior, then Jesus died in vain.

So # 1 Stay Filled with the Holy Spirit # 2 Speak the word without compromise

III. Stay Faithful to Your Mission & Message.

So these rulers threaten Peter and John and command them not to "*speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.*" All you have to do is comply with that one rule and we'll let you go on about your business. But Peter again is very straightforward. Is it right for us to listen to you more than God? You decide. This is the High Priest and rulers in Israel. If they were honest, they would have to acknowledge that Peter is right. But they are not seeking the truth. They are busy preserving their own place of power and prosperity. Later they give this command to Peter again. In Acts 5:28 the High Priest says, "...*Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us! But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: 'We ought to obey God rather than men.'*" Let that answer sink deeply into your heart for you may have to use it yourself. "*We ought to obey God rather than men.*"

Our mandate is to go into all the world and preach the gospel. The devil will do everything he can think of to keep us from doing that. We must allow nothing to stop us. The best response we can have to June 26th is to be more passionate, more faithful to the Great Commission than ever before. That is one reason we are launching Hope for Dads this week. We are penetrating the culture to reach unsaved people. We need your prayers and your participation. Let's do this thing!

Go back with me to the Sermon on the Mount. There Jesus said (Matt. 5:13 NIV) "*You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.*

14 "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

⁶ 1 John 1:10, "*If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.*"

That reminder is given in connection with “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake....*” Two metaphors are used. One is salt. In that culture salt was used for flavor and to preserve meat. They did not have refrigeration; they rubbed salt into the meat to preserve it. “*You are the salt of the earth....*” Your influence is what keeps the world from rotting in iniquity. “*But if the salt loses its saltiness....*” If Christians don’t exercise that influence; if they just blend in with the environment, then they are not fulfilling their intended purpose. If the salt tastes just like the item it is supposed to flavor, what good is it? If it fails to thwart the putrefying of the meat what good is it? “*It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.*” If the Church does not stay filled with the Spirit, if it does not stand up for the word of God and influence the culture, it is no longer good for anything—it will be trampled by men. The other metaphor is light. When persecution comes, it is tempting to step back and let somebody else take the heat. It is tempting to hide your lamp under a bowl, so nobody attacks you. Instead we ought to step forward and let our light shine. The world will tell us to shut up; we will not shut up. The world will tell us to cooperate with the new orthodoxy; we will not cooperate with that diabolical lie. The world will tell us there will be hell to pay if you don’t; we will by the grace of God pay the price for our loyalty to Christ and His word.

Acts 4:13-23 “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus. 14 And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it. 15 But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, 16 saying, ‘What shall we do to these men? For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. 17 But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name.’ 18 So they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John answered and said to them, ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. 20 For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.’ 21 So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way of punishing them, because of the people, since they all glorified God for what had been done. 22 For the man was over forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.

And being let go, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.”

IV. Stay United with Godly People.

Peter & John immediately went to their fellowship of believers and shared with them what they had been through. They had a godly support system. They were committed to one another. Peter & John did not have to go it alone.

If we are to thrive in an environment of persecution, we will need one another more than ever. In fact, one of the positives that may come out of a hostile culture is increased unity among sincere believers. Persecution is a sifting process. People who go to church just because it is socially advantageous will probably drop out. The more unpopular it is to be a Christian; the more genuine will be the gatherings. The more the world is against us, hopefully the more we will be for one another.

Of course, the sifting process will not look like unity at all. Some will yield to the culture and compromise Scripture. Others will stand on Scripture and resist the cultural demands. That fact alone will cause some differences. But other differences will lose much of their significance in the face of a hostile environment. Even Britain and Russia untied during World War II. When I was growing up, my brothers and I argued & bickered. But when some outsider attacked one of my brothers, they had all three of us to deal with. We got united real quick. May we realize more than ever before the value of like-minded Christians who will stand with us and pray for us.

#5 (to thrive during times of persecution) we must

V. Stay Prayerful.

Acts 4:24-31 “So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said: ‘Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, 25 who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: ‘Why did the nations rage, And the people plot vain things? 26 The kings of the earth took their stand, And the rulers were gathered together Against the LORD and against His Christ.’ 27 ‘For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together 28 to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. 29 Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, 30 by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus.’ 31 And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.”

If we don’t pray, we will not prevail! We will not thrive in an environment of persecution if don’t draw upon the grace of God. It is time to seek the Lord.⁷ The Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriage will backfire on the devil if—the Church sees it as a wake-up call and seeks God.⁸

So far that is not what I am seeing. I am hearing a lot of messages on loving people. Certainly we should be doing that and we should never stop doing that. But June 26th was a wake-up call for the Church in America. The enemy is at the gates, what are we going to do about it?⁹ In Scripture the thing that worked was a call to prayer and fasting. We see that in 2Chron. 20. Jehoshaphat was being invaded by the Moabites and Ammonites. The enemy was coming down on them. Do you understand, Church, the enemy is coming down on us. I’m not talking about gay people or Supreme Court justices; I’m talking about spiritual wickedness in high places.¹⁰ I’m talking about an intimidation like the one Goliath put on the armies of Israel. I’m talking about an invasion with doctrines of devils that would set up men’s judgements about the judgments of the Lord. Listen to what Jehoshaphat did in 2 Chron. 20:3-4 “*And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. 4 So Judah gathered together to ask help from the LORD; and from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD.*” When they turned to God in their hour of need God heard their prayer and intervened with His salvation. The right response is recorded in 2 Chron. 7:14 “*If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.*” Wouldn’t it give the devil a black eye if the Church of America did that, in response to June 26th? Wouldn’t it be awesome if this were the beginning of a Great Awakening in America?

But the Church’s response today looks much like its responses in the past.

In 1962 (Eagle v Vitale) the Supreme Court ruled against prayer in the public schools. Christians talked about how bad that was; but they did not get full of the Holy Spirit! For the most part didn’t even pray much in their own churches, let alone the schools. Compare that response to Daniel’s response when his government forbade him to pray to Jehovah (Dan. 6:6-10). It got him thrown in the lion’s den; but it also got the law changed. The change came about through a miracle of the Lord. In 1963 (Abington School

⁷ Ezra 8:21; Psalm 27:8; Proverbs 3:5-7; Isaiah 26:3-9; 55:6-9; Jerm. 29:12-14; James 5:13.

⁸ Romans 13:11-12; Revelation 3:14-19.

⁹ When an enemy is at the gates of a city, that enemy’s intention is to break through those gates and come into the city to take control of it. Our enemy, the devil, wants to break into the church with his damnable doctrines and set those ideas up in the church. The founding fathers of America established the First Amendment as a protection of the church from that kind of thing. However, it is ultimately the responsibility of the pastors/watchmen to keep it from happening. We are not welcoming the enemy in with his anti-biblical beliefs; we will resist him (1Peter 5:8-9).

¹⁰ Eph. 6:12 “*For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against....*”

District v Schempp) the Supreme Court ruled against Bible reading in the schools.¹¹ Christians also complained to one another about that ruling: “What is the world coming to when they can’t even read the Bible in the schools.” Of course, the educational system in America was founded on reading the Bible. That was about the only book some of them had. But American Christians as a whole simply kept living their lives as they had been and simply accepted the decline. There was more response in 1973 when Roe v Wade legalized abortion. That brought an outcry and that outcry was sustained for several years. But the response was mostly political in nature, not spiritual. I walked in Pro Life marches and held signs on busy street corners. And we prayed some as well. And some of that may have slowed the progression of evil; but it obviously did not stop it.¹²

Look with me at the prayer made to God in Acts 4.

(1) It was passionate and fervent. Acts 4:24 says they “*raised their voice to God*”—not just a few moments of somber silence, but they raised their voices unto God in prayer.

(2) It was public, united prayer, for verse 24 says they prayed in one accord.

(3) It declared faith in the sovereignty of God. Verse 24 again, “*You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them.*” Ultimately, God, you’re the One in charge here. The Sanhedrin may think they are in charge. But you made them and you made the air they breathe. “*Why did the nations rage, And the people plot vain things?*” That’s a good question to be asked today. Are these people fool enough to think they will overthrow the sovereign Almighty God who created heaven and earth? Their thoughts are vain and their efforts will prove futile in the long run. Herod and Pontius Pilot may have thought they were running the show at the trial of Jesus, but (see it here in verse 28) all their proud actions were actually “*to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done.*” Jesus is the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world. Herod and Pilot are accountable for their decisions, but God was fulfilling His plan above it all. He is able to make even the wrath of man serve His purposes.

So in the midst of all the threats from the Sanhedrin, the Early Church knew that God never stops being in charge. And they declared that in their prayers.

(4) Their specific request was for boldness and empowerment of the Holy Spirit (verses 29-30). That’s something important to know. If persecution against us increased, would that be our prayer? Or would we be praying, “God make them leave us alone. We have families. We don’t want to lose our jobs. We need our Social Security check. God please don’t let them take my Social Security check. I paid into the system for years so that would be there for me. God help me. Don’t let them take these things away from me.” That is not the kind of prayer we see here. Their prayer is for divine power to flow through them—for miraculous signs and wonders—for boldness to declare Jesus as Lord of all.

(5) Their prayer was answered this way. Acts 4:31 “And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.” Some of these were the same people filled with the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. For them it was not a one-time experience that you had 40 years ago. For them it was something they needed in the now. What you and I need more than anything else for this time and hour is to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Maybe you were filled 20, 30, 40 years ago. That was

¹¹ Engel v Vitale, http://www.oyez.org/cases/1960-1969/1961/1961_468 accessed 7/3/15. Abington School District v Schempp, http://www.oyez.org/cases/1960-1969/1962/1962_142 accessed 7/3/15.

¹² In all these cases there were pockets of people responding and calling out on God. However, most Christians maintained a rather lukewarm Christianity.

good for then, but are you full of the Holy Spirit now—because that is what will equip us for the now.

They did not get delivered from persecution. I don't even see them asking for that. What they got was a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. That's what God wants to give His church. He may have to allow persecution to get our attention so that we will pray. In was in a persecuting, hostile culture that this church in Acts thrived. The laws were against them, but the God of all the earth was for them. And if God be for you, who can be against you? "God, don't deliver us from persecution; deliver us through persecution. Anoint us like you anointed the Early Church. Empower us to turn the world upside down with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Do you know what 2 Tim 3:12 says about persecution? "*Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.*" "All" (everybody) that is really living godly will suffer persecution. If I have somehow ordered my life in such a way to avoid all persecution, something is wrong somewhere. Persecution is part of the package. If we have a mindset to avoid that at all cost, we've probably lost the battle before we even get started. If you joined the church to get ease and prosperity, you probably weren't told the whole story as to what this is all about.¹³

1. Stay filled with the Holy Spirit
2. Stay truthful and forthright in your testimony
3. Stay faithful to your mission
4. Stay united with others of like precious faith
5. Stay prayerful

VI. Stay Committed to the Eternal Kingdom.

Acts 4:32-37 "*Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. 33 And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. 34 Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, 35 and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need. 36 And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, 37 having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.*"

"This world is not my home, I'm just passing through, my treasure is laid up somewhere beyond the blue." Those are the words of an old hymn we used to sing.¹⁴

Is it really true of you and me? We may find out soon. "*For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*" (Matt. 6:21). Jesus taught His followers to lay up their treasure in heaven, "*where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.*" The thieves in our case may be government employees just doing their jobs. What will we do if the persecution turns financial? That's where I think it will hit first. That's where James Dobson and other national leaders are saying it will hit. It will come in the form of big fines and deprived entitlements. "If you disobey our commands we will fine you and tax you to death. If you do not cooperate with our agenda you do not get the entitlements others get."

The Early Church held very loosely to their earthly possessions. The loss of those possessions did not rip their souls to pieces, because that was not their primary concern. I see a lot of American Christians

¹³ Most of the persecution in America comes in the form of social pressures and some financial disadvantages. At this point very few of us suffer like the church did in Acts 4 or like multitudes of brothers and sisters do in other countries.

¹⁴ Wm. Hunter & James D. Vaughan, "I Feel Like Traveling On," *Church Hymnal* p. 133

wanting to know about prophecy so they can get the inside track on how to keep their earthly treasures. That's not what I'm seeing here in Acts 4. I'm not saying we should not try to preserve earthly treasures, but I'm saying if you love those things too much, you may have trouble thriving in the days ahead. The thriving the Early Church experienced was not in the form of accumulating earthly wealth. It came in the form of empowerment by the Holy Spirit. 1 John 2:15 *"Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him"* (KJV). I'm talking about a heart issue that has to be resolved in every believer's heart. When push comes to shove, how much will I compromise to keep my money and possessions? Hopefully every one of us can honestly say, "I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold, I'd rather have Jesus than richest untold"¹⁵ because we may someday face that kind of choice. Heb. 10:34 says those early Christians took joyfully the spoiling of their goods, *"knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance"* (KJV).

Let me read Heb. 10:32-34 in NIV *"Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. 33 Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. 34 You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions."*

Confiscation of property, I wonder how well we would deal with that? It all depends upon where our heart really is.

I opened this message with the words of Jesus in Matt. 5 *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven...."* That persecution happened to the Early Church and it did not rob their joy. In fact, Acts 5 talks about the beating the apostles received because of their faith and verse 41 says, *"So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name."*¹⁶ That is only possible when we Stay Filled with the Holy Spirit!

Pray

¹⁵ R. F. Miller & George Beverly Shea, "I'd Rather Have Jesus," *The Hymnal for Worship & Celebration* (Waco, TX: Word Music) p. 517.

¹⁶ Historically, when persecution happens, the victims do not get to do that in the context of being presented as a noble person standing for a righteous cause. Those in power spin the scenario to make the victim look like the villain. The persecution generally casts shame on the victim as if that person were evil in some way.

OUTLINE
How To Thrive In Persecution
 Acts 4:1-37

7-5-15

Intro

- > Matt. 5:10-15
- > Acts 2 & 3 leading up to text
- > Six Principles for Thriving in Persecution

I. Stay Filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:1-8)

- > Not a time to lean upon our own understanding
- > Jesus' instruction in Matt. 10:16-20

II. Stay Truthful in Your Testimony (Acts 4:8-12)

- > Do not adapt the message to please the hearer
- > Two Characteristics of Peter's answer
 1. He used the occasion to preach the gospel (verse 12)
 2. He did not tone down the message to their likes and dislikes (verse 10)
- > Result Acts 6:7
 - First step toward salvation is recognizing sin and need for repentance
 - By the Law is the knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20; 7:7; 1Tim. 1:8-11)

III. Stay Faithful to Your Mission and Message (Acts 4:13-22)

- > The name of Jesus (Acts 5:28)
- > The Great Commission
- > Matt. 5:13-16 (Two metaphors)

IV. Stay United with Godly People (Acts 4:23)**V. Stay Prayerful (Acts 4:24-31)**

- > June 26th is wake-up call for the Church (2Chron. 7:14)
- > 2Chron. 20:3-4
- > Church's Response in Past
 - 1962 Supreme Court ruled against prayer in schools
 - 1963 Supreme Court ruled against Bible reading in schools
 - 1973 Roe v Wade legalizing abortion
- > The Prayer in Acts 4:24-31
 1. Passionate and fervent (vs 24)
 2. Public and united (vs 24)
 3. Declared faith in Sovereignty of God
 4. Specific request for boldness and empowerment of Holy Spirit
 5. Answered in this way: Acts 4:31.

VI. Stay Committed to the Eternal Kingdom (Acts 4:32-37)

- > For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (Matt. 6:21)
- > Heb. 10:32-34

Conclusion:

- > Back to Matt. 5:10-1
- > Acts 5:41

QUESTIONS

1. Do you think staying filled with the Holy Spirit is the most important key to thriving in persecution? Why or why not?
2. Do you think it is effective to speak so forthrightly as Peter did in Acts 4:10 or should we tone it down? Are people more likely to get saved if we minimize their sin or should we confront it as disobedience to the will of God? If so, how should we do that?
3. Is there a temptation to withdraw and compromise the Great Commission when persecution comes? If so, how do we deal with that?
4. How important is the support of other godly people in thriving in persecution?
5. How important is prayer in dealing with America's current challenges? In the days ahead?
6. Do you think the initial wave of persecution against Christians will be financial? Why or why not? What can we do now to prepare for such a contingency?
7. Do you think it is possible to rejoice and thrive in persecution? What principles do you think must be in play for us to do that?