Session 13 The Certainty of Persecution in the West & Its Blessing (Jn. 15:18-24)

*On the notes here it says “Session 13,” and you might be thinking, “Okay, what is that about?” Stuart and I have taught four semesters on Friday nights, about fifteen weeks each, covering John 13 to 17, and we have two more chapters to go; each one is about fifteen weeks. This message is from about a month or so ago. I am reteaching it here on a Sunday morning because I felt it was important for our larger family to hear, not just our students and interns on Friday nights.*

*I am calling this, “The Certainty of Persecution in the Western Church and Its Blessing.” What I am wanting to do is stir up a long-term conversation. We cannot go very far in one session or cover very much ground. So in 2023, I want to stir up, not merely a year-long, but a longer conversation around this topic and what the Bible says about not just the fact of persecution but the blessing of it. The blessing is hard to get our mind around without the revelation of the Word of God. It is a topic we do not talk much about in the West, so it is new to almost all of us. However, I believe in the days to come this topic is going to become a very necessary and very important topic.*

1. the world hates believers who are faithful to say what Jesus says
   1. Persecution is both a demonic attack to hinder our spiritual growth and a divine gift to enhance it. God granted and appointed that His people endure persecution (1 Thes. 3:3; Phil. 1:29) that they may be transformed by it for their great benefit in this age and in the age to come. We do not make persecution happen to us in the will of God—it is granted as a divine opportunity that we don’t have unless God grants it to us. The apostles rejoiced in being “counted worthy” to suffer knowing how it transformed them and how precious it is to have it in their testimony when they stand before God.

29For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ…to suffer for His sake… (Phil. 1:29)

3…[to not be] shaken by these afflictions…know that we are appointed to this. (1 Thes. 3:3)

41They departed…rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer…for His name. (Acts 5:41)

*Paragraph A: In the Bible, persecution is both a demonic attack which hinders our spiritual growth and also a divine gift which enhances our spiritual growth. There are two very different tracks, and they are not contradictory at all. We in the West mostly think of the demonic attack. That is good, but it is not a complete picture of the biblical narrative of persecution. If we only see the demonic attack side, we end up being really vulnerable to responding in fear and offense at God and to drawing back and saying, “How dare You! And why? What is going on?”*

*However, the early Church and the apostles understood the divine gift. Paul makes this really strong statement in Philippians 1:29: “For to you it has been granted”—that is the language of a gift—“it has been granted on behalf of Christ to suffer for Him”—that is part of His gift to you.*

*And you think, “Really?”*

*In 1 Thessalonians 3:3, he says, “Do not be shaken by these afflictions,” and it means persecutions. “I want you to know this,” Paul says, “We are appointed to be persecuted.” The idea is because of the benefits that come along with it which Paul does not mention there, but he does in other places.*

*Now a strange idea here, but I just want you to think about it: you cannot make persecution happen to you in the will of God. Meaning, you could do something stupid and cause somebody to get mad and hit you, but think about the last ten to twenty years of your spiritual life, how many people have hit you in the face or thrown you into jail because you love Jesus? I think there may be one percent or less in the room here. My point is that you cannot make it happen. Moreover, physical harm because of Jesus, i.e. getting beaten or whipped even in the lives of those persecuted, normally it happens a time or two, and it is a gift from God. It is like God is giving you a bag of gold, but if you do not understand it, you would be confused by it. You cannot make it happen and most of you are not going to be thrown in jail or hit in the face or beaten in the next year because you love Jesus.*

*If the Lord gives you that opportunity in the future, when it is all said and done and you see the whole picture, you will say, “Thank You! Thank You! I wish You would have let that happen to me a couple of times!” It is something that is actually granted to you and appointed to you in the will of God at very few key times, but it is very important. In Acts 5 the apostles came to understand this, so they rejoiced when they had these few opportunities. I mean, Peter went to prison, I think, three times over many decades. Some people go to prison for ten or fifteen years, but for most it is short-termed thing, and they thought they saw the benefit of it and then actually rejoiced in it.*

* 1. There is a tension in rejoicing when God *grants* persecution to us as a gift (Acts 5:41; 2 Cor. 12:7-12; Phil. 1:29; 3:10; Col. 1:24; 1 Thes. 3:3; 1 Pet. 2:21) while being exhorted to pray for protection and deliverance from prison (Acts 12:5) or from the evil one (Jn. 17:15; Phil. 1:19, 25; 2 Thes. 3:3).
  2. Those who faithfully proclaim the truths that Jesus taught will be hated by those who hate Him   
     (Mt. 24:9). Jesus told them to know this hatred is actually against Him and not them. We must settle it in our heart that we will not escape their hatred if we speak the truth about Jesus and His message.

18“If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you.   
19…therefore the world hates you. 20…If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you…  
22If I had not…spoken to them, they would have no sin [national guilt for rejecting Me]…  
24If I had not done among them the works…they would have no sin…” (Jn. 15:18-24)

*Paragraph C: We are looking at John 15, as that is the series that we have been working on in this fourth semester in our three-year series on John 13 to 17. We are at the end of John 15. In John 15:18, Jesus says this, “If the world hates you, I want you to know that it hated Me first.” In other words, “They really only hate you because they hate Me. And if they persecuted Me, they are going to persecute you, if you say what I say.”*

*Verse 22, “If I had not spoken to them in the way I did, they would have no sin” and in this context it means they would not have had a national guilt for rejecting the Messiah. In other words, “If I had not done the mighty miracles, they would not have the national guilt that they have, but because I spoke to them the truth, it enraged them.” What Jesus is teaching the apostles in this, He is saying, “I want you to know their hatred is not towards you. It is towards Me, and so if you are faithful to what I say, they will hate you, so settle it in your minds.”*

*When I think of all of the themes that Jesus taught—let’s say there are ten categories of positive things or popular things that He said, and I have not listed them all. Like, “You are freely forgiven;” that is really good—there are a lot of really popular, positive things He said, but there are maybe five or ten or more unpopular things that He said. He is going to raise up the end-time Church to stand for the popular* ***and*** *the unpopular. Today in the West, we mostly only talk about the popular things, but when you look with clarity at the unpopular things that He said, my goodness, it is really intense. However, the closer we get to the coming of the Lord, the Holy Spirit is going to raise up the Church of those who are going to stand loyal to everything He said. Hatred will come to fullness.*

* 1. ***If I had not spoken to them***: The world hates Jesus’ teaching on man’s sin and guilt, His claim to be their God, judge, and the only way of salvation, and their need for His death on the cross.

*Paragraph D: For instance, the world hates Jesus’ teaching about man’s sin and guilt. They don’t like that. They like the love of God, free forgiveness, divine blessing, but not sin and guilt. They do not like His claim that He is God! They think that is a little intense. He is Judge, He is the only way of salvation, and He is the only accurate standard of morality and judgment. They do not like these ideas. They do not like the idea that they need His work on the cross to be saved, but again Jesus is coming back for a Church who is going to be faithful to say the whole story.*

* 1. ***They would have no sin***: Jesus is not making a theological statement contrary to Romans 3:23.   
     He is not saying that they were saved or without sin, rather that Israel would not have had national guilt related to rejecting Him as Messiah if He had not spoken to them with confirming miracles.
  2. John urged us to anticipate being hated for standing for truth and not be shocked when it happens.

13Do not marvel [be shocked or surprised], my brethren, if the world hates you. (1 Jn. 3:13)

*Paragraph F: We know that John is the one writing John 15; that is why it is called* ***John*** *15. Later on he writes his own epistles and letters. He wrote 3 John some decades later, and he said, as it were, “I want to elaborate on what Jesus said, on the night before He died, about being hated.*

*He said, “Here is what I want you to know: do not marvel when the world hates you.” What that means is we are to anticipate that if you are faithful to say all that He said, you are going to be hated, so just settle it.*

*What happens if we are not clear on this is that we marvel and are shocked when we are hated! Like, “What did I do? I only said this…” and we are surprised. So this is the problem if we do not anticipate being hated: we are shocked by it, surprised by it, taken off guard, and then we are far more vulnerable to being offended at God. We are far more vulnerable to being overcome by fear.*

*But when we see what the Scripture says, and we rehearse these truths in conversations with God many times, our hearts will get established with clarity. Then we can say, “Okay, we get what is going on.” We get it a little bit: the eternal rewards, the benefits of glorifying God, and the transformation of our lives, so we see more clearly what is going on. Okay, okay, it makes more sense!”*

*However, if you are not thinking about it, then you are suddenly surprised when the knock on the door comes, like it does in many countries, and the authorities come to say, “You have a decision right now to make. You are either going to say no to the things that Jesus said or you are going to jail or your children will!”*

*And in a moment you could be thinking, “Augh! I have not really thought much about this.”*

*So Jesus is preparing them in John 15, and John is also saying here, “Do not marvel, and do not be shocked by this. Actually expect it!”*

* 1. John 15 is the “intimacy with God” chapter (15:1-17). Intimacy with God is essential to being empowered to walk in joy when being persecuted (15:18-25). Two days earlier, Jesus prophesied that, in the end times just before He returns, “all nations” will hate His disciples (Mt. 24:9).   
     Hatred with lawlessness is the context in which the gospel will be preached to all nations (Rev. 7:9).   
     In AD 197, the church father Tertullian said, *“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”*

8All these are the beginning of sorrows [birth pains]. 9Then…you will be hated by all nations… 12lawlessness will abound…14the gospel…will be preached…to all the nations…” (Mt. 24:8-14)

*Paragraph G: John 15, the chapter to which we have devoted this fourth module, is a well-known chapter as the intimacy-with-God chapter. Two-thirds of John 15 is intimacy with God, abiding in Christ, etc., but the final third is about being hated for loving and being loyal to Jesus. And so two-thirds of John 15 is intimacy, one third is the prophecy from Jesus about being hated.*

*Now, what Jesus is actually doing, and we will look at this in a minute—this is Thursday night, the Last Supper. He dies on Friday, and so the night before He is elaborating on this idea of being hated which He had told them on Tuesday, two days earlier. In Matthew 24, He said, “I want you to know you are going to be hated!” So that was Tuesday, and now it is Thursday, and He says, as it were, “Let me unpack that a little bit more to you and explain why and how it works.” Of course the apostles are not really grasping what is really going on until later.*

*Look here in Matthew 24, the two days earlier, before He spoke John 15, He says in verse 8, “All these are the beginning of sorrows.” In the previous verses He gave a number of things, trends which would happen, that He called the beginning of birth pangs. Then in verse 9, He says, “Then”—which means after the season of the beginning of birth pangs—“all the nations will hate you.” Lawlessness will escalate at a level beyond any time in history but the good news is that there will be the greatest release of the Holy Spirit’s power and the gospel will go to all the earth. And, a phrase that we use, “the billion-soul harvest,” the multitudes are coming in with signs and wonders. The context for these signs and wonders in this great manifestation of power in verse 14 is actually the hatred and lawlessness of verse 9.*

*Now here is what I want you to notice here, and I have missed this for years: verse 9 says, “then,” meaning it is a timing indicator. This is after the season of the beginning of birth pangs; it is after that season. I believe now, prophetically, that we are still in the season of the beginning of the birth pangs. I believe we are getting closer to the end of that season, but I do not know when. However, verse 9 says that it is after the beginning of birth pangs when a new dynamic takes place. And here is the word that I have missed over the year: “you will be hated by all nations”—not a few nations but all 200 nations in the earth—After the beginning of the beginning of the birth pangs season is over, a new dynamic is going to happen. Lawlessness will explode. The hatred will be solidified in every nation of the earth.*

*There are about 200 nations on the earth. Right now, there are about sixty nations on the persecution watch list. There are sixty nations which are identified as “intense persecution,” sixty out of two hundred. There are a hundred and forty nations which are not identified that way. My point is: the season where all the nations hate those who belong to Jesus has not happened yet, and it is yet future. We see it increasing, but the word “all” has not happened. It is yet a future thing that is going to unfold.*

* 1. Some focus on understanding the end times but without prioritizing intimacy with God, while others focus on intimacy without interest in understanding Jesus’ end-time plan—both are essential!   
     The promise of the seal of divine love in Song 8:6 includes the Lord giving the worldwide body of Christ grace to give our lives for love even unto martyrdom—“love as strong as death”(Rev. 12:11). Specifically, this love is love for the Bridegroom King who loved us and gave Himself up for us.

6Set Me as a seal upon your heart…for love is as strong as death… (Song 8:6)

11They overcame him [Satan]…they did not love their lives to the death. (Rev. 12:11)

*Paragraph H: Some focus on the Matthew 24, and what He said on Tuesday about the end times, the hatred, the persecution. That has happened all throughout history, but it escalates in the end times far beyond the early Church. So, a lot of folks study the end times and do not really prioritize the intimacy part of John 15. The other group really prioritizes the intimacy, but they do not think much about the end-time storyline. However, both of them must go together, and that is one point that Jesus is making here.*

*One of the words that the Lord gave us in a very dramatic way many years ago in 1988 was Song of Solomon 8:6, and He spoke it audibly. Song of Solomon 8:6. He talked about the seal of love empowering the Church, and this is a promise that the Lord is going to release this seal of divine love, this Bridegroom’s love for His end-time Church as a mature Bride. This seal of love is an anointing for the Church across the whole earth, and it is just beginning to increase. We are watching it increase, but it is really going to escalate. Jesus is coming back for a Church that will be loyal in love and fearless, even before death. Her love will be stronger than death, and the end-time Church will love Jesus even in the face of martyrdom. They will say, “We love Him way more than your threats could cause us to back away!”*

1. millions of Christians are enduring persecution today
   1. Several “persecution watch lists” identify 60+ nations that have a high level of persecution against believers. Thus, about 300 million believers regularly face “the possibility” of persecution.

*Paragraph A: I have mentioned already that there are several persecution watch lists which identify sixty nations that have a high level of persecution today. Those sixty nations involve about three hundred million believers. These three hundred million believers, not all of them are directly being persecuted, but all of them are in close proximity to somebody who is. The threat is that maybe next week the knock will come on their door because it has already come on the doors of some of their friends or family members. So they are living in this challenge that this may happen a month from now, so they have to really determine where they are with God.*

* 1. Common elements of the persecutions seen in these 60+ nations include people being thrown in jail without a trial or being given a long sentence in a reeducation camp. Many are raped, beaten, or killed. Christian villages, churches, homes, and crops are burned, leaving families to starve. Many nations have “anti-conversion laws” that are enforced by the death penalty—when Muslims turn to Jesus, it is considered blasphemy against Allah. China is a surveillance state that has 500+ million cameras using A.I. with facial recognition to create *social credit scores* that penalize believers.

*Paragraph B: The common elements of the persecution—there is so much to say on this, and again I am just wanting in this message to stir up our conversation on this subject—thousands and thousands in these nations have been thrown into jail in the last ten years with no trial or they are given long sentences in “re-education camps” which are prison camps. Many, I mean hundreds of thousands and actually some millions, have been raped, beaten, or killed! I am talking about in the last ten years and within the last fifty years. Christian villages, entire small villages, their homes are burned, their churches are burned, all their crops are burned so that their families starve. Many nations have anti-conversion laws, particularly radically Islamic nations. These anti-conversion laws are enforced by the penalty of death, so if a Muslim turns to Jesus, it is blasphemy against Allah.*

*The same is true in India in the Hindu areas of India. It is a death penalty to renounce Hinduism and come to Jesus. The most invasive of all which we are familiar with is China and the “Surveillance State” that China has become. There are well over five hundred million cameras right now in China, and their goal is to make it several billion before it is all over. Cameras in some places are every fifty yards on the streets and in shops with artificial intelligence facial recognition technology. What they are doing through their developed system is spreading it out throughout China as it is only in part of China right now. Their goal is to fill China with it. A social credit score that is skewed against Christians is the goal, because they can see everywhere you go, what you purchase, what you buy, where you go, what is said in the meetings you go to. Teaching loyalty to Jesus will be considered a hate crime and a crime against the state, and if you get a bad social credit score you will not be able to rent an apartment, buy a house, get a job, get on a train or a plane! I mean, it is so severe! Go on the internet and check out some of the people whose lives have been devastated because they get a low social credit score because of their commitment to say certain things.*

*Anyway, this is going to be worldwide before it is over. I don’t mean that every nation will have the same intensity. I do not know that, but this persecution is coming.*

* 1. Pope John Paul II established the *Commission for Martyrs* which researched and cataloged all those who were killed for their faith in Jesus in the 20th century. They claim that the *“20th century has produced double the number of Christian martyrs than all the previous 19 centuries put together.”*  “The Esther Project” reports that about ***1,000,000 Christians were martyred between 2000-2010.***

*Paragraph C: Pope John Paul II established a Commission for Martyrs which you can check out if you want to. This commission categorized and researched all who had been killed for their faith in the twentieth century. Here is what their report said: “There were more Christians killed for their faith in the 20th Century, in those hundred years, than in the 1900 years before!” More than double in the 20th Century than the 1900 years before! That is a remarkable statement!*

*This other website, “The Esther Project,” says that in the last ten years about one hundred thousand people every year are being killed, not just being put in prison, but killed, and many more are being persecuted in a very severe way. The number is escalating rapidly, and it is only a short amount of time before it involves the Church in the West. We are a bit in a bubble, so this is not really a part of our family conversations. We think about it a little bit, not too much, but it is going to be knocking on the door of the Western world very, very soon. And “very soon” might mean five years, might mean ten years, maybe sooner, maybe later, maybe sooner. I do not know but I do not mean next week. Currently we see some persecution emerging, but it is mostly economic persecution or getting censored on social media and things like that. However, it is going to go far beyond this. We need to be aware and get informed and have those conversations with the Lord and our families where we say, “Okay, the word of God says this, and promises that. This is the reason…okay. Okay, I got it, and I am with You!”*

* 1. Christians enduring persecution in end-time prophecy is a sober reality (Mt. 10:21-22, 28; 24:9;   
     Lk. 21:16-19; Jn. 15:18-25; Rev. 6:9-11; 11:7; 12:11, 17; 13:7, 10;16:5-7; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4).

9He opened the fifth seal; I saw…the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God…  
11They [were to] rest…until the number…who would be killed…was completed. (Rev. 6:9-11)

6I saw the woman [Harlot Babylon], drunk with the blood of…the martyrs of Jesus. (Rev. 17:6)

*Paragraph D: Christians enduring persecution in end-time prophecy is a very sober reality, and we cannot brush this reality aside. These prophecies are going to come to pass. I have a few examples here in Revelation 6, how Jesus will not return until the number of martyrs is completed. There is a number that God has ordained or knows. I do not know how it all works, but until that number is complete, the Lord is not returning. Revelation 17:6 says the Harlot Babylon System will be drunk with the blood of the saints. Drunk means intoxicated, frenzied. Bloodlust meaning they get more intense the more they kill, and the more they want to kill, they are drunk with blood.*

*Now the problem in the West for all of us, and I am in the same situation, is that we look at these prophecies and think mostly of the demonic attack and fear or offense or confusion, but don’t understand what is happening. Here is the good news: when you read the apostolic witness and the revelation of the gift that is happening, I have good news for you. I believe that we read those prophecies and say, “Oh no!” But when they come, we are going to be surprised how the Spirit of glory and power of God is going to be with us in a way that we are not imagining right now, because the apostolic company rejoiced in it then and said, “Thank You! It is the gift of God! It is really helping us!”*

*We are thinking “Really?” but we do not have that Spirit of glory resting on us that Peter talked about (which I have later on the notes), when Peter said in 1 Peter 4:14 that when you are persecuted the Spirit of glory will rest on you.*

*I have had the opportunity to talk to a number of folks—I do not mean like a hundred, but twenty or thirty, I do not know the exact number—who had been severely persecuted, and I have asked, “What was it like?”*

*They said, “Well, I hated it, but there was something that happened on the inside of us. And it was like, ‘Wow! That was remarkable. I don’t want to get hit again, but something happened, and it was bigger than I thought in a good way.”*

1. responding to end-time prophesies of persecution: 3 applications

*Roman numeral three: How should we respond to these end time prophecies? I have three applications here. There are more than three but this is just a quick overview.*

* 1. ***Application #1: To arm ourselves to suffer***: Peter gave a “military call” to arm or equip ourselves for battle. First, by developing a biblical understanding of persecution—why God allows it to happen, what are the benefits for our personal life and for those who observe it, and what are the eternal rewards that follow. Second, by cultivating an intimate relationship with Jesus (Mt. 25:4;   
     Jn. 15:1-17). Third, by cultivating deep kingdom relationships with wholehearted believers.

1…since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind… (1 Pet. 4:1)

*Paragraph A: Application #1: Peter said in 1 Peter 4:1, “Arm yourselves with this mindset.” In other words, inform yourself what the Bible says about persecution. Now, most of us do not know much. We know it is going to happen, but we do not know why. We do not see the benefits, we do not know the rewards, we do not know, and we have just kind of heard it is going to happen. We hear stories from over there, and we think, “Oh no! Oh no!”*

*However, Peter said, “Arm yourselves for this.” Fill your mind with the biblical narrative regarding why God is allowing this to happen. What are the benefits? What are the eternal rewards? This will get you ready. Then arm yourself by being more intentional about developing intimacy with Jesus. You know, the first two-thirds of John 15, not just the final one-third on the persecution.*

*And, we have to cultivate deep kingdom relationships with people who are radically committed to Jesus and who will not back down. Meaning, people who say, “I have set my heart; I am going all the way! I am not just doing casual Christianity, weekend Christianity and then the rest of the week I do what I want.” Develop relationships with people who are sober about these realities.*

* 1. ***Application #2: To prepare young believers***: We must prepare young believers for persecution.

*Paragraph B: Application #2: This is the one I am really passionate about. I am really passionate about number one, but I am really passionate about this application that is as a spiritual family—though I do have a personal mandate, but we do as a family too—we need to arm and prepare the next generation with biblical understanding of these things. Right now the Church in the Western world, larger than America, this train of persecution is racing fast! Most young adult believers are completely unaware it is coming, and it is going to blindside them and hit them with devastatingly negative results if they are not ready or prepared. As spiritual moms and dads here in this house—and there are many others outside of here. of course—we want to be intentional about arming them and stirring up the conversations within our families and in our friendships, talking about it. Not only about it, but we do need to get sober about this and train the next generation with intentionality.*

* 1. ***Application #3: To help the persecuted Church***: We are to help other believers by our prayer, financial support, encouragement. Do a Google or YouTube search of “persecution” of Christians.

*Paragraph C: application #3: Then we need to help the persecuted Church with finances, prayer, and encouragement. I encourage you to go on YouTube and put “persecution of Christians” in the search. There is so much information concerning what is going on around the world, but most of us in the West are in a bubble. We know a little bit, but there is much more that is happening than we are aware of. It is dangerous for us to stay in this bubble that we are in. That is why I am wanting to begin 2023, not making this our number one subject, but intentionality studying what the Bible says about persecution, the benefits of it, the eternal rewards, the Spirit of glory, what it is, and why it is happening, and where it is happening. And we want to get ready because, I assure you, Jesus is coming back for a victorious Church that is ready, and I want to be a part of the solution in that. I want to be used to get people ready. Because, they will be ready, I assure you of that.*

1. how Persecution benefits a believer
   1. The Lord uses persecution to transform His people and to cause them to cease from sin (1 Pet.4:1). Persecution does not leave room for sin that is so easily tolerated in the Western Church at this time.   
      Peter assured believers that the spirit of glory will rest on those who are persecuted (1 Pet. 4:14).

1…for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, 2that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men...14If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory…rests on you…[and] He is glorified. (1 Pet. 4:1-2, 14)

*Roman numeral four: How persecution benefits a believer. This is a really big statement that Peter made. He said that “he who has suffered in the flesh”—that is talking about persecution, by the way. He is not talking about sickness. There are other verses about sickness. It is not talking about a personal tragedy: your house burned down, your car was in a wreck, you had bankruptcy. Those are all real issues, but that is not what Peter was referring to in 1 Peter; he was talking about persecution for standing for Jesus—he said, in effect, “I have good news for you. When you get persecuted, you cease from sin.”*

*Like, “What?” Well, the things that we easily tolerate in the West, the sins that we kind of wink at and are not too serious about, over in Iran they do not tolerate those. Their conversations within their own soul with God, and the conversations that they have in their families and with one another, the sermons they preach, the prayers they pray are greatly affected by the persecution. The options they have to go out and do this or that: those options are off the table. They used to do them, but they do not anymore because persecution shifts the conversation and the internal processing in a dramatic way. And when we stand before the Lord, we will say, “Thank You!”*

*We always wanted to shift that conversation. We were always going to, but here we are ten years later, and we are still spiritually bored. How many people have said, “This is the year…” and ten years later they are still stuck in compromise and spiritual boredom. Persecution unsticks the Church because it shifts options, mindsets, and conversations in a very, very dramatic way. 1 Peter 4:14—look at it—“the Spirit of glory rests on them.”*

* 1. Tribulation (persecution) produces perseverance and godly character (Rom. 5:3-4). Persecuted believers grow in dependence on Jesus with more prayer with fasting in seeking discernment—  
     on who and where to meet, etc. The “oil of intimacy” is cultivated best in the fires of persecution.

3We glory [rejoice] in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance   
[deep resolve to pursue and obey God] 4and perseverance, character [godliness]… (Rom. 5:3-4)

*Paragraph B: Paul talked and wrote about this in Romans 5. He talked about tribulation, and again this is not sickness or a family tragedy or economic bankruptcy type of thing. This is persecution. He says, “It causes godliness to increase in you.” It causes godliness, and I have written here that the oil of intimacy is best cultivated in the fires of persecution. Now, I would like to go deep in intimacy without persecution, and I think we can, but we are far more urgent about it when the pressure is on.*

* 1. Paul spoke of persecution as evidence or proof of God’s righteous judgment or wise leadership   
     (2 Thes. 1:3-11). Paul identified 4 ways that give evidence that persecution benefits God’s people.

3…your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds…4so that…  
[we boast of]…your patience [perseverance] and faith in all your persecutions…that you endure, 5which is manifest evidence [proof] of the righteous judgment of God [good leadership],   
that you may be counted worthy of [prepared to experience more of] the kingdom…6since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, 7and to give you rest… when the Lord Jesus is revealed… (2 Thes. 1:3-7)

*Paragraph C: This is a really important passage here, 2 Thessalonians 1, and I want you to say to yourself, “2 Thessalonians 1,” and you can say it to your neighbor if you want too. You have probably not said 2 Thessalonians 1 twice in your life, but now you have said it twice today! I mean, nobody studies 2 Thessalonians 1. I have looked at it over the years, and it is complicated. I mean, the language is like, “What?”*

*I will say this it is the most important chapter in the Bible explaining why persecution is a blessing sent by God. Now when you read it in a fast read, you will not catch it. I have read this chapter, I have checked commentaries, and most of the commentaries hardly say anything because it is complicated. And I said, “Lord, we have to get into the understanding of what Paul was saying because there is no chapter that says it more clearly than this chapter,” and because of the language that he used you have to really camp out on it for a while.*

*What I am really wanting to do is not to go into it in depth but I give a few statements on four evidences. Paul says, “This is evidence that God’s leadership is good: by you being persecuted!” He gives four reasons why God’s leadership is vindicated as excellent because we are persecuted.*

*Again, if you read it fast, you think, “Hmm, what are those four now?”*

*I have really poured into this, but I am determined, saying ,“Lord, I really want to see what Paul saw,” because I believe that the end-time Church will have far more intense persecution than the early Church, and if we can get into this apostolic understanding, then we can be equipped and rejoice like they did, and maybe even more so because we have the Bride of Christ revelation, Jesus is coming back for the Spirit and the Bride crying, “Come!” There is going to be this first-commandment dimension that is so strong.*

*Anyway, I am going to give you a quick snapshot of a passage as you might be saying, “What?”*

* 1. ***Evidence #1***: The fact that they had ***patience*** or perseverance when persecuted is proof that God’s good leadership provided them with grace or supernatural ability to endure with faith and love.

*First, he starts off with evidence #1 in verse 3, telling them, “Your faith.” Now this is a young church, by the way. It is not years and years old. It is a young church, and he says, “Your faith is growing so fast and your love is abounding in the midst of persecution!”*

*That is a miracle for people to have abounding faith—meaning they think Jesus’ leadership is excellent; that is what faith abounding means. “We love Your leadership! We believe in it! We trust You!” That is what faith means here. “And our love is abounding in the midst of persecution!”—Beloved, that is a miracle beyond measure because in our human strength alone without the aid of the Holy Spirit there is no way we could endure persecution with confidence in His leadership and love overflowing. I mean people throughout history have been persecuted, but they were mad and afraid the whole time they were being persecuted. This is a miracle happening there.*

*He was saying, “I want you to know,” verse 5, “your perseverance in persecution with love and faith demonstrates you are a portrait proving that God is real and living in you! No one could have confidence in God with joy and love like you do without God being near you and invested in you in a deep way. You are portraits of the glory of God.”*

*You see, other churches were looking at Thessalonica and saying, “Wow! Jesus is close and near and committed to them! Look at that!”*

*In effect, he said, “And you are a picture to the unbelieving world; you are proof of God’s leadership!” when he said, “manifest evidence,” meaning, “you are proof of God’s good leadership. You are the manifest evidence, the proof of it!”*

*Now here is the tricky phrase. He said in verse 5, “It is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God.” When we think of judgment, we are thinking of punitive judgment, and judgment does have a punitive dimension. However, when the word* ***judgment*** *is used, it is like the guy who is put on trial and then the judge gives a verdict. He gives a judgment, and it might be, “You are innocent!” So a judgment means a decision, a verdict. They were saying that “God’s good decision making is proven by the way you are responding as there is no way you could respond this way if God were not deeply invested in you. You are proof that God lives in humans!”*

*And perhaps the Thessalonians were thinking, “I guess we really are, because a few years ago we never could have done this!”*

*Paul said, “That is God already proving Himself to you.”*

* 1. ***Evidence #2***: Persecution rightly responded to results in being ***“counted worthy****”* or equipped   
     to experience more kingdom activity. “Worthy” doesn’t mean “deserving of,” but “suited for,”   
     or “prepared for.” Persecution purifies us by leading us to align more with God’s leadership. Persecution is an effective “accelerant” to maturing in godliness which in turn increases our spiritual capacity to enjoy God and experience more kingdom activity in our lives.

35Some of those of understanding shall fall [martyred], to refine and purify them… (Dan. 11:35)

*Second, he highlights evidence #2 in verse 5. He said, “The second thing is that you are being counted worthy of the kingdom!” In saying “being counted worthy of the kingdom,” he is not using the word “worthy” in the sense that you are deserving the kingdom. He is using the word “worthy” in the very different sense, that you are being fitted, suited, and prepared to experience more of the kingdom.*

*And so he says, “In the persecution, not only are you a living portrait that God has invested in you and is real and loves you, but He is changing you so your spiritual capacity is increasing dynamically and you are going to experience more of God in this age and more of God in the age to come because of this gift of persecution that you never would have picked for yourself.” You are changing dramatically. You are being counted worthy! You are being fitted or suited for the kingdom, meaning more experiencing of the kingdom activities in this age. However, we find in verses 11 and 12 that he is really saying that your preparation in this age is going to show forth in the age to come, and it is going to blow your mind how much benefit you are getting through this increased character happening because of persecution.*

* 1. ***Evidence #3***: God’s wisdom in ***repaying with tribulation*** those who persecute His people becomes evident as their evil deeds and love of darkness are manifest (Jn. 3:19). Their murderous desires come to the surface as they persecute people —a dark dynamic occurs in them as they become “drunk with blood” (Rev. 17:6). The greatest criticism of God in history is that His judgments are not fair. God’s judgment of the wicked is vindicated as their love of darkness comes to the surface.

28…[be] not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition,   
but to you of salvation…29To you it has been granted…to suffer for His sake. (Phil. 1:28-29)

19[The verdict is]…men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. (Jn. 3:19)

*Third, Paul highlights evidence #3 in verse 6 and says, “And not only that, but the very fact that God’s judgments are coming against the wicked.” The number one thing that God is criticized for in human history is His judgments, His temporal judgments in the book of Revelation of the nations.*

*“God is not a God of love! We hate His eternal judgments, that doctrine of eternal judgments!” the nations say.*

*But the Lord says, in other words, “Here is what I am going to do. I am going to use the persecutors. They will come against you, and you are going to respond in the glory of God, and the darkness of their hearts will come fully to the surface. Then God’s end-time judgments before the Second Coming and afterwards will be seen as wise and good. So your part of this story of God is vindicating His wise judgments not as evil, not as cruel and not as unfair but as good, and the Lord is using you to help that story go across the earth! And you are going love it when you see how the Lord feels about your being used in that.”*

*Then comes the big one, which you will not catch at a quick read, the big evidence in verse 7, “and God is going to give you rest.” He is going to bring to full completion in your life the fullness of what He has ordained for you. Because of persecution you became worthy, meaning your character increased and this full obedience put you in a position to get the full reward in the age to come when you are at rest. And, when everything that God has promised to you is secure in full and final forever, and He has vindicated your righteous choices, it is going to be amazing!*

*You are going to be blown away and will say, “Father! Thank You for persecution. I am brought to rest!” meaning the fullness of all that You have ordained for me. That is the idea and Paul develops it clearly in verses 11 and 12, this idea of the fullness.*

*We are going to unpack 2 Thessalonians 1 a bunch in the days to come. I want you in your minds to say, “Okay, as a spiritual family and as an individual I am going to understand these things! I do not want just a quick glance. I want to know what these things mean!”*

* 1. ***Evidence #4***: God gives them ***ultimate rest*** when they receive “all the good pleasure of His goodness” (2 Thes. 1:11) in the age to come related to their spiritual maturity resulting from persecution. Thus it helps us grow unto being worthy (prepared) to receive the fullness of our calling.

6…it is a righteous thing with God…7to give you rest…when the Lord Jesus is revealed…  
11We pray always for you that God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness…12that…Christ be glorified in you, and you in Him… (2 Thes. 1:6-12)

*Paragraph G: We are looking at this fourth evidence. We must remember he said, “righteous judgment,” but it means right leadership or, let’s say, good leadership. It is evidence of God’s good leadership, His righteous decision-making. He is going to bring you to rest. This is a huge topic which he develops later on in verses 11 and 12. Let’s read it again to get the feel of it. He says in verse 6, “It is a righteous thing”—in other words, God’s good leadership—“and it is going to be publicly seen by all in your life when God brings you to rest. He is going to do this in context to the Second Coming, and not until then. You will not even see this until then, but I promise you,” Paul said, “by revelation that this is true.” He went on, “And therefore” in verse 11—now this used to be the strangest prayer to me. When I prayed this passage years ago I thought, “What in the world is he talking about?”—he said, “Because you are being persecuted and you are responding right and God is blessing you in it, here is my prayer. I pray this all of the time for you that God will count you worthy, not just your character change, but count you worthy of the full blessing that He ordained for you from the beginning!”*

*My opinion, and I do not have a way of knowing this for sure, but I have a strong opinion that most believers will not enter into the fullness of their reward that God ordained for them. I am not talking about entrance into heaven; that is for free. I am saying that there are so many eternal rewards, there are so many dimensions to this, my opinion is that most believers throughout history will not have a full reward because they did not have the full obedience. Persecution is ushering them into that spot. And Paul said, as it were, “I get it! It is happening to me, and I want this to happen to you that God would count you worthy,” meaning prepared, “for this calling.”*

*Well, what is this calling? Here it is. It is a strange sentence: “That God would fulfill”—the key word here is “all”—“that God would fulfill all that He has planned for you.” That is way more than entrance into heaven. It is something that I am praying for, and it is not sure yet in your life, but this persecution is leading to full obedience is going to lead also to full reward!” He said, as it were, “I am praying constantly that you can imagine the glory! This is gold beyond measure, and I think it could happen to you!”*

* 1. Oh, to be counted worthy of a full reward (2 Jn. 8) on Judgment Day without any loss (1 Cor. 3:15)!

14If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. 15If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. (1 Cor. 3:14-15)

8…that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward. (2 Jn. 8)

*Paragraph H: I have written here, “Oh to be counted worthy!” which means that we are fitted, we are prepared, we are equipped in our responses to God to have a full reward with no loss. 1 Corinthians 3 talks about the Judgment Seat of Christ where every believer will stand. Paul talks about the people who are rewarded, and all the rewards are different. There are various levels, and everyone has a different measure of reward. It is really clear in the Scriptures, but I do not want to go into that now.*

*In verse 15, Paul talks about believers—and I think millions are going to be in this category—who will suffer the loss of what they could have had, but yet they are still saved. They still have the white robe. They are still in the city. They still eat from the Tree of Life and say, “Hey man, we are here!” and they are happy. But Paul says, “I want more than just entrance into the City. I want that first, but I want the fullness of what God ordained for me from my mother’s womb! I do not know what it is, but I want the fullness!” John talks about this in 2 John, the same John who wrote John 15. He said, “We do not want to lose the full reward that we have been laboring for. Full obedience is the only way to full reward.”*

* 1. Paul wrote of his passion to obtain a heavenly crown around AD 54 (1 Cor. 9:24-27). He was zealous not to be disqualified from receiving “the prize” or an imperishable crown (9:25).

24…[I run to] receive the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain…25an imperishable crown…27I discipline my body…lest…I myself should become disqualified. (1 Cor. 9:24-27)

*Paragraph I: Now I want to just give you a quick 1, 2, 3, 4 on this. Paul was really into this idea of the full reward. This is an idea that we hardly ever hear about. I mean, it is just not a topic that people have teased out in the Scriptures and studied through, this idea of various levels of reward, suffering loss, full reward, and all of these kinds of things. Here is what Paul says. This is about AD 54. I want you to see the timeline, so I am going to do this really fast. It is about AD 54 plus or minus a year or two because all of the historians go back and forth between AD 53 and AD 55. So I just put it in the middle!*

*Here is what Paul said. Remember, this is 1 Corinthians 9. A minute ago we were at 1 Corinthians 3 where he told them about a reward and a loss. Now he is applying it to his life. This is six chapters later, and he is writing the same way. He said, “I want you to know I am running”—“living my life” is what he means by running the race—“I want the prize! I want more than the free gift of salvation, I want the prize!” Then he went on to identify it as an imperishable crown. He says in verse 27, “I want this prize badly! I discipline my body lest I be disqualified.” He does not mean from salvation. He is not saying, as it were, “If I am not disciplined, I will lose my salvation.” He is not saying that at all. He is just saying, in effect, “I will not get that crown! I want that crown. That is the prize! I have locked into it!” This is what he is telling the people in 2 Thessalonians 1.*

* 1. Near the end of Paul’s life, he *pressed* for *the prize* of the upward or heavenly call (Phil. 3:14).   
     He wrote this aroundAD 62 or 8 years after he wrote of “running to win the prize” (1 Cor. 9:24). He lived for 6 more years, dying in AD 68 “with assurance” of obtaining a crown (2 Tim. 4:8).

12Not that I have already attained…I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me [fullness of his calling]…14I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call [the fullness of his heavenly calling] of God in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:12-14)

7I have finished the race…8there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness. (2 Tim. 4:7-8)

*Paragraph J: Now it is about eight years later, and I have the timeline there, plus or minus a year or two. He is writing to the Philippians and says in verse 12 chapter 3, “Not that I have already attained that prize.” That is, “I do not have the assurance yet! My obedience is still in place but I am pressing on! What am I pressing on for?” Well, in Thessalonians, he says, in effect, “For all of the good pleasure of God’s goodness, the fullness for what God has ordained!” Here he says it differently: “I want to lay hold of that for which God laid hold of me! I want the fullness of what He ordained for me! I mean, I will be happy in heaven, but I know there is more! I want everything that He has called for me!” And I have not attained that yet!” This was eight years after he wrote he was going for the prize in Corinthians, and it was still about six years before he died. He said, in effect, “I want that prize. I do not have it yet,” verse 14, “but I am pressing for it! The prize of the upward call, that is the heavenly call! I want that heavenly dimension of my inheritance more than just entrance into the city, more than just being in the family. I want those; they are the biggies, but I want everything that He ordained for me!”*

*Now it is about six years later—2 Timothy 4—he is in prison and writing to Timothy. You can read it in context. He said, “Timothy, the time of my departure is here. I am going to die.” He was killed right after this. He said here, “I finished the race.” Now this is fourteen years after he first started talking about this in 1 Corinthians 9. Fourteen years later, he was saying, “Timothy, I got the crown! The Spirit has made known to me that I got the crown! He has told me! I made it! I know what He is talking about!”*

*Now, this verse, “the crown of righteousness,” in my opinion is a verse that we are all comfortable with people lying about at funerals. At funerals we hear, “Well, the brother is getting his crown.” That is not true at all. Most people do* ***not*** *get this crown. There is* ***no*** *evidence in Scripture that says* ***all*** *of the eternal rewards are for* ***everyone****. As a matter of fact, there is suffering loss. There is lack of the full reward. As for this crown of righteousness, well, everyone gets the white garment, and everybody gets to eat from the tree of life, and everyone is on the streets that are golden, but there are twenty-two different types of rewards that Jesus identifies in the book of Revelation, and they are all given in various degrees and measures.*

*However, when Paul said, “I got the crown! I got it! I see it! This crown is for everyone who loves His appearing,” that is where people get messed up because they think that if you love the idea that you are going to be raptured any minute then you get a crown. No! That is not what he is talking about. He is saying, “If you love Jesus in His end-time storyline, and you are fully engaged with faithfulness because you love it, you will get the crown too.” He is not talking about everybody who wants to be raptured tomorrow. There is nothing special about that. He said, “You love His appearing.” Meaning, “You love the storyline enough to fully invest yourself in it even if you lose your life in it.” That person who loves His appearing at that level will get the crown!*

* 1. The genuineness and maturing of our faith through persecution is more precious than gold.

6…though now for a little while, if need be, [if necessary] you have been grieved by various trials, 7that the genuineness [maturity] of your faith, being much more precious than gold…may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus…8whom…you love. (1 Pet. 1:6-8)

12…do not think it strange [to be persecuted]…13rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may be glad with exceeding joy. (1 Pet. 4:12-13)

17Our light affliction…is working for us a far more exceeding…weight of glory… (2 Cor. 4:17)

* 1. The afflictions of Christ are not lacking in terms of accomplishing redemption. Paul rejoiced in the opportunity to magnify how attractive Jesus is to an unbelieving world by loving and trusting His leadership while being persecuted. Believers who faithfully love Jesus even when persecuted are   
     a “living portrait,” giving a public display of how glorious Jesus is to them (Song 5:8, 16).

24I rejoice in my sufferings…and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ… (Col. 1:24)

10That I may know Him and [His] power…and the fellowship of His sufferings… (Phil. 3:10)

*Paragraph L: Paul says—and this is fantastic—he says in Colossians 1:24, “I rejoice in my suffering.” He said this a number of times, and so did Peter, and so did the others. Well, what did they know that we do not know? We are going to know it before this is all over. I am committed as just an individual to know way more about this, and you are, too, as well as many others across the world who love Jesus!*

*Look at this. It was a very strange sentence to me when I read this forty years ago in my twenties as I was teaching Bible, “I rejoice in my sufferings”—I remember I taught Colossians—“and I am going to fill up in my flesh that which is lacking in the afflictions of Christ!”*

*I thought “What?” because I thought Paul was saying “I am going to get persecuted to ‘fill up in my flesh’”—he means persecution as in hit, beaten—“I am going to fill up what is lacking in what Jesus did not accomplish on the cross.” I thought, “That does not sound right, Paul. Go read the book of Romans, Paul, and get your theology right!”*

*Now, Paul was not saying that Christ did not fully accomplish everything on His part. However, what he was saying was that in God’s eternal wisdom and plan of the kingdom, there is Jesus’ perfect offering on the cross once and for all that is finished, but then in every generation God has ordained that there is a public witness of the truth of that cross in the lives of the people. So Paul was saying that to believers and unbelievers alike, the Lord says, “In My graciousness I am giving a public witness of the beauty of Jesus, the goodness of Jesus!”*

*Paul might have said, “In my generation people say, ‘We do not know if that guy died on a cross, you know, in Jerusalem as Paul was preaching around the ancient world.’ But they say, ‘Look at you! You know something that we do not know!’”*

*What Paul was doing was being a living portrait of the beauty of Jesus’ leadership, and then people would say, “Do you know something that we do not know about this Man?”*

*The Father would point to Jesus’ death on the cross and the ministry of the Spirit, but the living witness of believers contributed in their generation to proving that Jesus is real because nobody could live this way if He were not real!*

*It reminds me of the Song of Solomon when they go to the bride in chapter 5, and she is being persecuted, and the daughters of Jerusalem say, in effect, “What do you know about Him that we do not know?”*

*She answers with all of these glorious things about Him and says, “This is my Beloved! This is my Friend!”*

*All the others were witnessing her and said “We want what you want!”*

*And Paul so was saying, “I want to be a part of that public witness of the truth of the cross!” Beloved, God is going to raise up an army of people across the earth, this privilege, that we all get to be a part of in our generation.*

*Amen and amen!!!*

*Let’s just stand before the Lord. Beloved, there is more understanding coming. We do not have it right now, but we are going to be equipped. Our children are going to be ready. They are going to be rejoicing, not retreating in fear, because more understanding is coming to the body of Christ, the end time Church.*

*Father, we ask You let us see what Paul saw! Let us feel what he felt so we can respond like he responded. Father, I ask You for this community that we could be spiritual moms and dads who raise up a generation of fifteen-year-olds and twenty-year-olds with clarity who are armed for this. I ask You to help us be faithful witnesses to the next generation.*

*Now, I want to invite anybody who would like prayer. Maybe you want prayer because you are saying “I want to be one of these witnesses! I want to partake!” You can come up, or stay in your chair and pray for yourself.*

*Others of you are saying, “You know it kind of sounds like it is true what you are saying, but I am still afraid. I mean, I do not know, but I would just like a little peace today if you do not mind!” Come up for prayer.*

*Somebody else says, “My body is hurting. I’m sick and need prayer.” Just come on up and stand here in the front on these dark lines and make a line across the front as we worship.*

*Oh, and by the way, Happy New Year!!! Thought I’d give you a nice cheery message today! Actually this is a cheery message; it is actually a rejoicing message once it connects, but right now it is an “Ugh” message, but in a minute it will be a cheerful message. We are not there yet. I am not there yet, but I am reaching for it.*

*I would like different ones to come on up and stand in front and lay your hands on these, asking them what they would like prayer for and then pray for them.*

*Father, we ask You for the Spirit of glory, even ahead of time. We ask for living understanding. Lord, I want to participate in the drama of making You look beautiful to unbelievers by the way I love You and believe in You. I want to be like the Thessalonians! Lord, I want You to be able to count us worthy of the fullness for what You have ordained for us! Father, I ask for the Spirit of glory to come. I ask for messengers and for a messenger anointing across this whole spiritual family.*

*Lord, we want to help the next generation. We want to strengthen those teenagers, those early twenties. Lord, move by Your power right now I ask. Lord, have Your way in our midst. Abba, have Your way in our midst! Jesus, we want to love You with all of our hearts. We trust Your leadership.*

*Lord, I ask You to heal bodies, heal hearts, impart a messenger anointing in a greater measure.*