

Blessed Are The Persecuted

The Beatitudes (part 8)

Summary: We live in a cave of darkness, built by our corruption, and therefore cannot have the promises of the Beatitudes without the pain of reorienting ourselves and stepping out into the light, toward the good, pleasing and perfect will of God.

Scripture: Ephesians 5:1–14; Matthew 5:3–16

Date: Sunday, 26 March 2023 (NarellanCong)

Introduction

Legion – Plato's allegory of the cave (S02E08)

I want to begin today by showing you a clip from *Legion*, a superhero television series created by FX studios —and, no, I'm not being self-indulgent this time!

It's a slightly longer clip than usual, but it describes a famous allegory of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, and does so quite perfectly for our Internet age:

And now we come to the most alarming delusion of all: the idea that other people don't matter. Their feelings. Their needs.

Imagine a cave where those inside never see the outside world. Instead they see shadows of that world, projected on the cave wall.

The world they see in the shadows is not the real world. But it's real to them. If you were to show them the world as it actually is, they would reject it as incomprehensible.

Now, what if, instead of being in cave... you were out in the world... except you couldn't see it. Because you weren't looking. Because you trusted that the world you saw through the prism was the real world.

But there's a difference.

You see, unlike the allegory of the cave, where the people are real and the shadows are false... here, other people are the shadows. Their faces. Their lives. This is the delusion of the narcissist... who believes they alone are real.

Their feelings are the only feelings that matter, because other people are just shadows... and shadows don't feel. Because they're not real.

But what if everyone lived in caves. Then no-one would be real. Not even you. Unless one day you woke up and left the cave. How strange the world would look after a lifetime of staring at shadows.

Narrated by actor Jon Hamm, this take on Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" describes our time, the human condition, and the role of the friends of Jesus in waking up the sleepers around us (Eph 5:6–14).

Explanation

A Paradox

Once having lived in a cave of darkness humankind have created around ourselves through sin, the friends of Jesus are those who have seen a great light (Mt 4:16).¹ We have left the cave and are no longer to be counted among the sleepers, for we have woken up and risen to new life. The light of Christ has shone on us!

The friends of Jesus have discovered He offers a new identity that is defined neither by our past or our brokenness. Nor is it limited by our shame.

God loves us more than we could ever comprehend —and isn't that what we all want, just to be known and to be loved, and to love in return?²

Our Creator is good and wants good for us, even though He doesn't promise life will be easy. The fallen life weighed down by sin is but a shadow. Our Creator offers us mercy instead of condemnation. But that is only part of the story.

Found in *The Gospel of Matthew*, chapter 5, the beatitudes of Jesus make a lot of promises: to gain the Kingdom of Heaven, to receive comfort, to inherit the Earth, being filled, shown mercy, seeing God, being adopted into his family and counted as heirs. Yet the Way of the Beatitudes requires of us many emotional and mental and spiritual steps that create the paradox, described by writer and pastor Arthur Pink, where

God's saints rejoice with joy unspeakable, yet they also mourn with a lamentation to which the worldling is an utter stranger. The believer in Christ has been brought into contact with a source of vital satisfaction that is capable of meeting every longing, yet he pants with a yearning like that of a thirsty heart (Ps. 42:1). He sings and makes melody in his heart to the Lord, yet he groans deeply and daily. **His experience is often painful and perplexing, yet he would not part with it for all the gold in the world.**³

That paradox is created by promises that require some level of pain, yet the real paradox is those promises were always the intention of our good and generous Creator. It is our self-imposed cave of darkness, built by our corruption, that has created the human condition, whereby we cannot have those promises without the pain of reorienting ourselves and stepping out into the light, toward the good, pleasing and perfect will of God.

The question then is: will you walk through the paradox, taking the painful steps to realise the promises of the Beatitudes? Are they worth it? I certainly think so.

Right Has Become Wrong

The first four beatitudes are the hardest because they are *negative* in orientation. They all involve recognising how we became defective and then pursuing what has become desirable.

The next four beatitudes are *positive* in orientation. They all involve steps of transformation into the friends of Jesus, who overflow with good in their own lives, among their family and friends, and in all their spheres of influence.

As I have noted many times already, the Beatitudes invite misinterpretation because we want them to mean what we hope they mean, which is far easier to take than what they actually mean.

Despite our disposition to soften Jesus' beatitudes, there is no mistaking the meaning of the last one:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. (Matthew 5:10)

This is a hard saying, yet according to Baptist theologian and pastor, Andrew Fuller,

It is a strong proof of human depravity that men's curses and Christ's blessings should meet on the same persons. Who would have thought that a man could be persecuted and reviled, and have all manner of evil said of him, for righteousness' sake? And do wicked men really hate justice and love those who defraud and wrong their neighbours? No; they do not dislike righteousness as it respects themselves: it is only that species of it which respects God and religion that excites their hatred. If Christians were content with doing justly and loving mercy, and would cease walking humbly with God (Mic. 6:8), they might go through the world, not only in peace, but with applause; but he that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution (2 Tim. 3:12). Such a life reproves the ungodliness of men and provokes their resentment. (Andrew Fuller, 1754–1815)⁴

In other words, once one has become “pure in heart” and a “peacemaker”, surprisingly, this invites persecution. It is not so much a matter of what we do in our lifestyle, but why we live the Way of the Beatitudes.

Living to please God condemns those who live to please self, thus evoking their hatred. Only an understanding of our fallenness and sin can help explain how such good becomes treated as if it is immoral.

How bad has our fallenness and sin become? Let me give you a quick example.

In September 2022, ABC Radio Adelaide published a feature by Nicola Robey, who identifies as a mermaid.⁵ In her own words,

I've always loved swimming and the ocean, and I always felt that I swam as a mermaid whenever I was in the water, even before I had a tail.

When my husband bought me my first tail nearly seven years ago, it was the best Christmas present ever.

I started looking into mermaiding and discovered a worldwide community of it, and it's absolutely huge. In Adelaide, we have our own merpod. For me and a lot of other people, we identify as mer ...

My favourite thing about mermaiding is the freedom — being able to be myself and feeling free in that environment. It's a combination of peace and happiness and a little bit of empowerment ...

I'm not sure I feel like a creature, but I don't know whether I feel 100 percent human either.

Just so we're clear: there are no such things as mermaids! Mrs Robey wants us to believe she is more herself when she pretends to be a fictional creature. That the government-funded ABC would promote this lifestyle as perfectly natural does not surprise me... and, yes, it is reprehensible.

Human fallenness and sin has reached such a point, in our day and age, where you can deny biological reality and pretend you're a mermaid; with a male body, you can compete against women in sports, and no one will dare challenge your right to demolish female records;⁶ you can be sexually attracted to an inanimate object;⁷ or, even marry yourself, the height of self-centeredness;⁸ but pursue the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:16-25) by following the wisdom and example of the most exemplary human being who ever lived, so as to gain the kingdom of Heaven, and you will be ridiculed for it.

Tell me how that makes sense?

For proof of how exemplary Jesus was, check out this t-shirt you can buy on Amazon:

What Is Persecution?

To follow the Way of the Beatitudes leads to a life of God's promises being fulfilled, but even Jesus acknowledged the pursuit will bring persecution. He seemed to think it was worth it though:

You are blessed when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of me. (Matthew 5:11)

This verse describes three sorts of persecution the friends of Jesus should expect to endure in the normal course of daily life. The first is **insults** —that is, verbal abuse, being bitter or abusive language.

The second is **persecution** —which seems redundant to say, doesn't it? The word translated here means "to pursue". In this context, the meaning is that the friends of Jesus can be expected to be pursued, which indicates harassment, trouble, or being molested, either physically or verbally. It is perhaps better to say the second form of persecution is **harassment**.

This is the kind of treatment Saul of Tarsus subjected the first friends of Jesus to before he himself had an encounter with Christ (Acts 8, 9). Saul/Paul then faced this same kind of treatment on his own missionary journeys.

The third type of persecution is **defamation** of character. Detractors will seek to cancel the friends of Jesus, ruin our reputation, even accuse us of being immoral, a danger to society, a criminal offender. Sound familiar?

Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:12)

Jesus noted the prophets faced the strongest opposition of these kinds. What was their crime? Serving God by following His instructions.

No one will deny persecution in any form is very unpleasant indeed, especially when it results in death, as it did for the martyrs, like Stephen (Ac 7:54-60).

Persecution is most unpleasant, not for its physical discomfort but for the social discomfort (ostracism) and the mental discomfort (doubt).

What should be our response? To be glad and rejoice because persecution lets us know we are on the right track leading to great reward!

Being An Idiot Does Not Count

There is a danger in that last statement however. Many Christians have heard the words, “your reward is great in heaven”, and so have sought out persecution, even martyrdom.

In seeking spiritual reward they neglect to notice the caveat, “persecuted *because of righteousness*” (emphasis added). Being an idiot, and then suffering for such disrespectful behaviour, does not count as persecution.

The apostle Peter warned against this when he wrote,

It brings favour if, because of a consciousness of God, someone endures grief from suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if when you do wrong and are beaten, you endure it? But when you do what is good and suffer, if you endure it, this brings favour with God. For you were called to this, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He did not commit sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth; when he was insulted, he did not insult in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten but entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree; so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:19–24)

Many Christians have brought disrepute and ridicule to Christ Jesus and His Church by their misconduct or misjudgment (see 1 Pet. 2:19–24). Let me say it again: being an idiot does not count as persecution —I said it again because it’s fun to say ☺

Join The Line Up

Persecution has been endured by the friends of Jesus from the very beginning. *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, first published in 1563, is a classic book describing a history of Protestant martyrs. Yet the Bible itself contains many examples:

Cain was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother’s were righteous. (1 John 3:12)

The first son of Adam and Eve, Cain, murdered his brother Abel (Gen 4:1–16).

Joseph set out after his brothers and found them at Dothan. They saw him in the distance, and before he had reached them, they plotted to kill him. (Genesis 37:17b–18)

Joseph was persecuted by his brothers —although one might argue he started out as an idiot— and then, in Egypt, he was cast into prison for righteousness’ sake because he would not commit adultery with his master’s wife (Gen. 37, 39).

“May the LORD take note of you and judge,” [the Israelite foremen] said to [Moses and Aaron], “because you have made us reek to Pharaoh and his officials —putting a sword in their hand to kill us!” (Exodus 5:21)

Moses was unfairly criticised and challenged many times (see also Ex. 14:11; 16:2; 17:2; etc).

Samuel was rejected (1 Sam. 8:5). Elijah was despised (1 Kings 18:17) and persecuted (1 Kings 19:2). Micaiah the prophet was hated (1 Kings 22:8). Nehemiah the priest was

oppressed and defamed (Neh. 4). Christ Jesus himself, the faithful Witness of God *par excellence*, was put to death by the people to whom He ministered.

Stephen was stoned, Peter and John cast into prison, James beheaded, while the entire course of the apostle Paul's life and ministry was one long series of bitter and relentless persecutions.

We have a great cloud of witnesses (Heb 11-12) who endured much, yet were rewarded far less than have been the contemporary friends of Jesus who have benefitted from their legacy. Let us too leave a legacy of faith and witness, as we strive forward for the sake of the Kingdom!

Application

The Persecuted are Blessed

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. (Matthew 5:10)

The fallen world's hatred against the friends of Jesus manifests itself in insults, harassment and defamation, all of which are violence. May the grace of Almighty God, the Father, enable us to take to heart the promise: "When you do what is good and suffer, if you endure it, this brings favour with God" (1 Pet. 2:20b).

With this beatitude, which all of the beatitudes lead up to, the Lord Jesus declared that blessed, happy, fortunate, to be commended and honoured are those who, through single-minded devotion to Him, are called upon to suffer.

Does Christ Jesus want us to suffer? No. But this world has become far corrupted from its creation. The friends of Jesus are blessed because persecution give us the hard-to-explain privilege of having fellowship in the sufferings of our Saviour. The apostle Paul wrote on this,

My goal is to know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, (Philippians 3:10)

The friends of Jesus are blessed because

we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope. This **hope will not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts** through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Romans 5:3-5)

The friends of Jesus are blessed because we shall be rewarded in full on the great Day to come, for as it is written,

Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer. Look, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will experience affliction for ten days. **Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.** (Revelation 2:10)

It is fair to say, the joy to which the friends of Jesus are called is not in spite of persecution, but because of persecution. When we rejoice because of persecution this is not the expression of a martyr-complex, but the joyful acceptance of the badge of belonging to the

community of faith which will endure to the Day Of The Lord. We are the people of God who are 'out of step' with the value systems around us and are so thankful we no longer are slaves destined to destruction. We have left the cave and have entered the light!

Conclusion

It Is Still the Best Life, After All

Remember who it is that persecutes the friends of Jesus, who insult, harass and defame us: it is the cave dwellers, those who have built around themselves a dungeon of sin and fallenness. They do not live in the light; they merely enjoy shadows of the pleasures God intended for all His people to enjoy eternally.

When the cave dwellers take note of the light, turn around and walk out of the cave, we will rejoice, no matter how fierce the conflict heaped upon us by those who choose to remain in the cave.

I would rather chose to suffer with Christ rather than enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season:

and chose to suffer with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasure of sin. (Hebrews 11:25)

For I know the friends of Jesus will reign with Him, according to the certain promise:

[we have become] children, also heirs —heirs of God and coheirs with Christ— if indeed we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. (Romans 8:17)

Remember Peter and John, who

went out from the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to be treated shamefully on behalf of the Name. (Acts 5:41)

So, too, in the Philippian dungeon, with backs bleeding,

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. (Acts 16:25)

We are told that others

sympathized with the prisoners and accepted with joy the confiscation of your possessions, because you know that you yourselves have a better and enduring possession. (Hebrews 10:34)

May the grace of God enable all those who are the maligned, misunderstood and oppressed friends of Jesus draw from these precious words of scripture the comfort and strength they need.

Despite the inevitable insults, harassment, defamation and other violence we may face, placing our faith in Jesus and living a Christian lifestyle is still the best life, after all!

Believers Are Salt And Light

Remember the conclusion of the Beatitudes:

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt should lose its taste, how can it be made salty? It’s no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet. **“You are the light of the world.** A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:13–16)

Let us not just walk out of the cave leaving others behind, stranded. No! This fallen and sinful world needs the friends of Jesus to live as the blessed, no matter how painful persecution may be.

For we are salt, giving flavour; we are light, bringing warmth and illumination. We do not merely cast shadows of a free, full and forever life on the wall of the cave but offer our testimony of the good news about Jesus.

How else will the cave dwellers taste and see that the Lord is good?

May our family, friends and neighbours see in our good works the truth of the good news about Jesus, yearn for that truth themselves, that we might lead them out of the cave of their sin.

Later in our service, we will welcome new members into our congregation. Later this afternoon, we will celebrate the baptism of a sister in faith. These are the acts of those who have walked out of the cave into the glorious light of faith in Jesus.

Are you still in the cave, living the shadow existence that is the human condition, with its corruption? Wouldn’t you rather walk through the paradox out of the cave, taking the painful steps to realise the promises of the Beatitudes? They are certainly worth it!

Become a friend of Jesus, for then yours will be the free, full and forever life promised. The Beatitudes invite you to step out of the cave into the glorious light of the One who loves and accepts you unconditionally. You have nothing to lose but everything to gain. Get up, sleeper, and rise up from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.

If you want to begin your journey out of the cave, the Prayer Team will remain after the service to pray with you, that the Holy Spirit would come into your life, complete the work of conviction, and guide you into the truth we all seek. If you are watching online, please leave a comment or contact me using the form on our website, and I will follow up with you.

Let us pray...

Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 2 In contrast to the assertion of “Nature Boy”, the 1948 song by Eden Abhez, sung by Nat King Cole, then later by David Bowie for the 2001 musical *Moulin Rouge!* The narrator of the song asserts, “The greatest thing you’ll ever learn/Is just to love and be loved in return”, yet the good news about Jesus is quite the opposite.
- 3 Arthur Walkington Pink, *The Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer* (Bellingham, WA, USA: Logos Bible Software, 2005), pg 55–56.
- 4 Ibid.

- 5 Nicola Robey, as told to Daniel Keane, “Mermaiding provides freedom and empowerment in the water for Nicola and her merpod”, *ABC Adelaide*, 23-Sept-2022, <https://replug.link/182876f0> (accessed 21-Mar-2023).
- 6 Jonathan Kay, “Ignoring Biological Reality Puts Female Hockey Players at Risk” *Qillette.com*, 9-Dec-2022, <https://replug.link/46d45d60> (accessed 21-Mar-2023).
- 7 “Man with objectophilia details how he fell in love with balloons”, *News.com.au*, 16-Feb-2023, <https://replug.link/f5e49500> (accessed 21-Mar-2023).
- 8 Annie Holmquist, “Can’t Find a Man? Now You Can Marry Yourself!”, *Intellectual Takeout*, 5-Jan-2017, <https://replug.link/469c3050> (accessed 21-Mar-2023).