

A Limit to Persecution

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Preacher: Matthew Capone

[0 : 0 0] This morning in my congregational prayers, I often do the persecuted church around the world. And right now there's all sorts of things going on. Our brothers and sisters are suffering in a variety of circumstances.

Of course, I mentioned in China, there are people who sell Bibles who are being put on trial. It's very difficult in China to get a hold of a Bible. And at some level, you're going to be harassed or arrested if you sell Bibles.

It's true in India that there are anti-conversion laws. And so it's illegal to try to convert someone to Christianity. In fact, it's a crime in China to teach Christianity to a child.

Actually, sorry, it's a crime in India to teach Christianity to a child. In Nigeria, there are violent attacks against Christians from extremists and Muslim terrorists.

In Pakistan, Christian women are kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam. And so this is something that's going on right now in the church that we're united with by virtue of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

[1 : 0 0] There is real suffering in real time and space now in 2021. The church faces persecution at various times and various places. It is an ongoing reality in our world.

The same was true in Daniel's time. Now, of course, we wouldn't have called it the church, right? It would have been the nation of Israel. But it's the one people of God that we see in the Old Testament and the New Testament. And so as we look this morning, talking about the persecution of God's people, we're going to see two things.

First of all, the reality of persecution. Second, the limits of persecution. The reality of persecution and also the limits of persecution.

Starting with the reality of persecution, we are given some background here at the beginning of Daniel chapter 8. And we see the same concept that we saw last week, which is that animals represent kingdoms.

And so you remember I told you about Sam the Eagle and the fact that he represents America. Here we have animals that represent kingdoms as well. Unlike chapter 7, though, we are given clear explanations of which animals are which countries.

[2 : 0 3] And so we see Daniel has a vision, verses 1 and 2. In the vision, he's transported to Persia and he encounters two different animals. First of all, there's this great ram with uneven horns. And we're told in verse 20, the ram represents the kingdoms of Media and Persia.

Now the ram, verse 4, becomes very great. The only problem is that the ram's not the biggest animal in the street. The ram is then later challenged by a goat.

And this goat, verse 5, has a conspicuous horn. And as great as the ram is from verse 4, the goat apparently is even greater. And we find out in verse 21, the goat represents Greece. So two animals, ram, Media, Persia, goat, Greece.

Now, there's a great battle between the goat and the ram, verses 6 and 7. They duke it out against each other. And we find out that the goat runs at the ram and breaks his two horns.

So the ram is then trampled. So there's a goat and a ram battle. Okay. Goat wins. And we're told that this is Media, Persia, Greece.

[3 : 0 6] We now know, in retrospect, there's almost universal agreement here what these kingdoms represent. Greece here, we understand, to be Alexander the Great. Okay.

It makes sense that he's so powerful. It also makes sense that his kingdom is replaced by four smaller kingdoms. Because that's exactly what happened in history. So Daniel didn't know that at the time. We know that now.

We are being told what was going to happen to Daniel. Not to Daniel, but to God's people, they were going to see, first of all, Persia become great. Second of all, Greece become great.

Alexander the Great was going to be great. And then his kingdom went split into four different kingdoms. Okay. If you're a student of history, you know this. So I'm not going to dig us into the weeds on that. This is all historical background for what our focus is this morning.

And our focus is this. It's going to be verse 23, this king of bold face. So after the four kingdoms that follow Alexander the Great, we're going to meet this very frightening king.

[4 : 07] Again, verse 23. He's called the king of bold face. And we find out immediately what he does. Verses 24 and 25. He shall destroy, this is verse 24, mighty men and the people who are the saints.

And so we see that this person is going to be someone who persecutes God's people. That's what it means that he's going after the saints. Verse 25.

He shall destroy many and he shall even rise up against the prince of princes. Many people believe that this is a reference to God himself. So this is going to be a king who's blasphemous in what he does. We're told in verses 10 and 11 that he's going to go up against the stars.

And we understand in the Old Testament that that's symbolism for God's people. So this is a king who has it out for Israel. This is a king who's blasphemous.

He sets himself up against the prince of princes. He destroys the people who are the saints. We see in verse 12. He's going to throw truth to the ground. This is not a normal king.

[5 : 09] It's not just simply a kingdom like we saw last week that's influenced by demonic forces. This is a king with a special focus and persecution and torment on God's people.

He rises up against the princes of princes. He challenges God himself. And just like there's almost universal agreement that in Greece here we're seeing Alexander the Great. Thankfully we have almost universal agreement today also about who this figure is.

There's belief that of course the four kingdoms that come from Alexander the Great, one of them was the Seleucid kingdom. And out of that there came a figure in the 2nd century B.C., a man named Antiochus IV.

And Antiochus had a special focus on persecuting God's people. In fact he called himself Epiphanes, which was a way of saying that he was God. And I'm just going to give you a brief summary of the things that he did.

This comes from an Old Testament scholar who says this. Antiochus IV of Seleucia, who styled himself Epiphanes, meaning God manifest, invaded Jerusalem, despoiled the temple, commanded the burning of the scriptures, forbade the covenant right of circumcision, put to death many faithful Jews, and ultimately instituted pagan sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple.

[6 : 19] In other words, it would be hard to imagine this man doing worse things to God's people. And this prophecy given to Daniel has already been fulfilled, right?

The 2nd century was a long time ago. And so the question for us this morning is, of what use to us is this passage? What are we to take away from a prophecy given to God's people that's already been fulfilled?

And what we do in situations like this is we look at a specific instance. This is the specific instance of Antiochus IV. We draw out a general principle. We look at something that happened in the past. We draw a principle for how it applies to us today. Remember our principle from last week. There are demonic forces at work in the governments and kingdoms of this world. And some governments focus intensely on persecuting God's people.

Often this coincides with blasphemy. And that's what we see here, right? He's throwing truth to the ground. He's challenging God. He's claiming to be God. And we see this, as I've already mentioned, around the world. Now, if you were in Sunday school today, Scott Sage talked to you about our focus on missions as a church.

[7 : 28] As the missions team has looked at various things, we've seen that there are portions of the world today that experience intense persecution. These are places like portions of Africa. There's places in southern Asia.

And there's places in the Middle East. Those are the hot spots of persecution in the world today. And our Lord Jesus teaches us the same thing, that persecution is a reality for the church around the world and throughout time.

In Matthew chapter 5, verse 11, he says, Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you on my account. And then in John chapter 16, he says this, They will put you out of the synagogues.

Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father nor me. But I have said these things to you that when their hour comes, you may remember that I told them to you.

I did not say these things to you from the beginning because I was with you. So track with me here. Specific instance, Daniel's warned about coming persecution. General principle, we also know persecution exists.

[8 : 33] Jesus teaches the same thing. Jesus tells his disciples why it is he wants them to know this. That when their hour comes, you may remember that I told them to you.

God wants his people to know about persecution in advance. How does the church persevere in suffering and persecution?

First of all, the church perseveres in suffering and persecution by knowing it and expecting it. When persecution comes, we are not caught off guard.

We're not surprised. Because we know this is the way the world works. And so the application for us is this.

Are you ready to suffer for the name of Jesus Christ? Are you prepared to suffer for the name of Jesus Christ?

[9 : 30] Daniel was warned. Our Lord Jesus has also told us the same. There will be suffering for Christians in this life. We are not surprised when it comes.

In fact, we're told in 2 Timothy 3 that if you're a Christian, you're going to suffer persecution. Paul says this. All who desire to live a godly life in Jesus Christ will be persecuted. While evil people and imposters go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

Of course, we know that's happening today, right? There's all kinds of deception going on in our world. Deception about why we're here. What's the purpose of life? What does it mean to be human? What's the distinction between our creator and the creation?

What are the purpose and limits of human sexuality? Jesus also tells us in John chapter 15, Remember the word that I said to you, a servant is not greater than his master.

If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.

[10 : 35] Remember, we talked about this in the book of 1 Peter over and over again. There's this principle, as go the master, so go his disciples. As go the master, so go his disciples. I might say something obvious, but here's the takeaway.

Here's where the rubber meets the road. It's tempting if Christians don't know these things, they haven't thought through them, and they're not prepared. When persecution comes, they think, Oh, this proves that God's not real. This proves that God doesn't exist, because if he did, he wouldn't let this happen.

And yet, if we know the Bible, we can know the exact opposite. Actually, this confirms what Jesus said. This is the pattern that we knew was going to play out.

Instead of shaking our faith, it reminds us of what we already believed. This is what life in the world looks like. That is the fact, the reality of persecution.

That's our first step in persevering and continuing. Don't be surprised by it. Don't let it lead to doubt. We know about these things in advance.

[11 : 41] Jesus has already taught us and warned us. Now, we know persecution is coming. Of course, that knowledge by itself is not enough. Helpful, right?

Helpful, but not sufficient. And so we see not only the reality of persecution, but also the limits of persecution. There's this question in verse 13 that's asked by the Holy One.

Then I heard a Holy One speaking, and another Holy One said to the one who spoke, for how long is the vision concerning the regular burnt offerings and the transgressions that make desolate and the giving over of the sanctuary and the host to be trampled underfoot?

In other words, okay, we understand severe and intense persecution is coming. How long are we going to have to suffer under it? How long is it going to last?

Are we going to be able to hold on? Of course, this is the question of God's people throughout history, right? How long? How long will this particular suffering last? How long will we wait till our Lord Jesus comes again?

[12:48] And there's an answer here immediately in verse 14. And he said to me, for 2300 evenings and mornings, then the sanctuary shall be restored to its rightful state.

So this is talking about the heinous things that Antiochus IV is going to do are going to be limited by these 2300 days or mornings and evenings. Now there are three different theories about what's represented by the 2300 evenings and mornings.

I am, you're welcome, not going to drag you into all the different theories. Regardless of what is meant by 2300 mornings and evenings, in every instance, the point is this.

There is an end to the time of persecution. God has set a limit. He has numbered the days. There is no place or portion of suffering for his people that he will not bring to an end.

God is still in control. He brings an end to every persecution. This goes back to what we've seen before. Remember, we talked about the fact that God numbers the days of kingdoms.

[13:53] He numbers the days of kings. He numbers the days of those who persecute his people. There is a limit and an end to persecution. And so, of course, we see this also in verse 25.

Look with me there. By his cunning, he shall make deceit prosper under his hand, and in his own mind he shall become great. Without warning, he shall destroy many, and he shall even rise up against the prince of princes, and he shall be broken, but by no human hand.

And he shall be broken, but by no human hand. In other words, no matter what happens, no matter who rises up to come and persecute God's people, that person will ultimately and finally be broken, not by a human hand, but by God himself.

This is exactly what we saw in 2 Thessalonians 2, verse 8. Jesus is going to destroy them with his breath. Now, again, this might sound just like the reality of persecution, something that's obvious, and the Bible is reminding us of obvious things, reminding us of the fact that persecution is real.

Yes, we know that. We need to remember it. Reminding us of the fact that God limits persecution. Yes, we know that, and we need to be reminded of it, right? That's not our gut response when we find ourselves suffering.

[15:14] We don't think to ourselves, oh, this is no big deal because God has set a limit to it. No, when you're in the midst of suffering, that's what you forget, right? When Christians were suffering under communism, I guarantee to you that they weren't just skipping about, thinking to themselves, well, this is bad right now, but God set a limit to it.

No, have to be reminded and stirred up, have to be encouraged by the fact that God has put an end to every persecution. And so these are things that are simple in some ways, but not easy.

Simple, but not easy to remember that God is still in control. No matter what's going on, carry on. Keep going. Don't lose heart. God's church suffers for a time.

She will not suffer forever. There's a reality to persecution. There's also a limit and an end to it. Of course, our Lord Jesus tells us that there is a blessing as well.

He tells us in Matthew chapter five, blessed are you when others who value and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven.

[16:25] For so they persecuted the prophets who are before you. Of course, Jesus doesn't just offer this blessing we've already seen in 2 Thessalonians. He comes and he brings it to pass.

Again, verse eight, the lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.

And so how is it that God's church perseveres in suffering and persecution? We are prepared because we know the reality of persecution. So we're not surprised. We take heart and are able to persevere because we know the limits of persecution.

We have hope because we know that it will not last forever. Some of you will remember I mentioned this at one point last year when we were going through COVID together.

I told you the story of the Stockdale paradox that Jim Collins tells in his book, Good to Great, about Admiral Jim Stockdale, who was the highest ranking military officer in the Hanoi Hilton.

[17:26] He was a prisoner of war during Vietnam and he was imprisoned for eight years and he was one person who was able to make it out alive when many people did not. And so Jim Collins asked him this question, who didn't make it out?

Who did not survive the Hanoi Hilton? And he said, oh, that's easy. The optimists. The optimists? I don't understand, I said now, completely confused given what he'd said 100 meters earlier.

The optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said we're going to be out by Christmas and Christmas would come and Christmas would go. Then they'd say we're going to be out by Easter and Easter would come and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving and then it would be Christmas again and they died of a broken heart.

Then he turned to me and said, this is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end, which you can never afford to lose, with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.

Brothers and sisters, the church perseveres in persecution because we are never confused about our fate that we will prevail in the end. We know that Jesus is coming.

[18 : 35] He set a limit to persecution and he will destroy with the breath of his mouth. We also are able to face the most brutal facts of our current reality. Persecution is real.

As goes the master, so go his disciples. And so God's people persevere because we know that we will prevail in the end.

We are prepared by the reality of persecution and we're encouraged by the limits of persecution.

And so we can know the words of our Lord. Remember the word that I said to you, a servant is not greater than his master.

If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name because they do not know him who sent me.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you for your word that challenges us and encourages us and we ask that you would do both things this morning for us, that you would drive this vision deep into our hearts, that we would remember that no matter what happens, you truly are in control.

[19 : 42] You are the one who allows us to go in persecution and you are the one who sets its limits. And so we praise you and thank you and we do that in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.