

HOW TO PERSEVERE WHEN PERSECUTED

James 1:12; Revelation 2:10

In 2015, the 39-year-old Maickel Melamed ran the Boston Marathon and finished last. He crossed the finish line around 4 a.m., 20 hours after the race began. What made Maickel's race significant is that he suffers from a disease similar to muscular dystrophy, which meant he didn't so much run the race as walk it. **There's a picture of him as he was crossing the finish line.** As you can see, he battled the heavy rain throughout the night and overcame hunger and endured pain for hours as he trudged through the race but finished, nevertheless. As he reflected on his accomplishment, Maickel stated, "In any marathon, you have to know why you're doing it. Because in the last mile, the marathon will ask you." Part of Maickel's motivation came from wanting to honor Boston Children's Hospital where he was treated as a child. His parents brought him to Boston Children's Hospital years ago for treatment, and they didn't think he would survive. However, the staff at BMC saved his life.

My friends, if you were in his shoes, would you last? If you were in his shoes, would you even join the race? Maickel said, "In any marathon, you have to know why you're doing it". He did it for a purpose that's why he persevered.

We're in the third part of our series on "God's Spiritual Champion". In this series, we're talking about pursuing excellence. Because if you're going to be a champion for God, you need to excel in different areas of your life. In the first message, we looked at becoming a finisher, a fighter, and a faith-keeper. That's the profile of a Spiritual Champion and we said that if you finish the race, you will receive the Crown of Righteousness from the Lord Jesus himself. Last week, we looked at overcoming the pitfalls in your life. We said that according to the Bible runners undergo strict training.

They undergo strict training in order to avoid the pitfalls that will hinder them from running the race. What are the pitfalls? Worries, wealth, and wrongdoings. The 3 W's. And then, your training consists of the 5 R's. Can you think of one? I can think of one, the last one, which is Rely on God. The last is the most important one. In the end, you'll receive the...Incorruptible Crown.

Today, we'll look at another Crown. I've entitled this message, "How to Persevere in the Face of Persecution". Please read this passage with me from James 1:12, "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him."

The Crown of Life will be awarded by the Lord Jesus to you if you stood the test. You see, as you run the race of life, you are also being tested. Life is a test. It is a test of your will and character. Moreover, it is a test about how you would respond when your faith is under fire.

Now, I believe the trial that James is talking about here is the kind of trial that you face when you undergo persecution because you're a Christian. If you look at the background of his letter, he wrote this to the Christian Jews who were scattered outside Israel and settled in Gentile countries. That time period was called the Dia'spora. The Jews were scattered all over the Roman Empire. These scattered Jews were seldom accepted by their countrymen, often abused by the Gentiles, and treated like they were less than slaves in some places. And if you were a follower of Jesus, you were hated more and treated more harshly. But apart for that reason, we can turn to Revelation 2:10 where the Crown of Life is also mentioned. In this verse, Jesus is saying to the Christians in the Church of Smyrna, "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be

faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown.”

The question is, why are Christians persecuted? Why are they the most hated, reviled, and harassed group of people on this planet? Why have there been more than 70 million Christians martyred since 33 AD according to the Voice of the Martyrs?

We find the answer in 2 Timothy 3:12, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

What the apostle Paul is saying is that once you become a Christian, you can expect persecution to come. Now that you're identified with Christ, those who don't know him and even hate him will hate you as well. You now become the target of the enemy, Satan, and he will use people to bring you down.

And so, the Christian life is not an easy life. I try to point this out to people I lead to Christ. I tell them that the Christian life is like a bed of roses but with all the thorns and thistles. There will be good days and there will be bad days too. And right at the start, a bad day can happen because persecution can come from one's own family.

What do you do when persecution comes? Do you just give up and say it's not worth it? Mind you, there are Christians who have actually given up their faith in the face of persecution. They did not endure. They gave up the fight. Were they really Christians? Only God knows. It's not for us to judge. But we're talking here about us. We're concerned about what our stand would be when persecuted.

So, when persecution comes, what do you do? You persevere! You stand firm! You endure! You don't throw in the towel. You don't give up the faith! Like Pacquiao, you keep on fighting. He will fight again on August 21, right, even though he is already 42 years old. He is one persevering guy!

So, even though Satan says he has won because people have turned against you or put you in prison or took away your certain freedoms, God knows who the real winner is and he will vindicate you in the end.

Now, how do you persevere? This morning I want to share with you three principles to keep in mind in order to stand firm against the enemy's attacks.

First,

1. Recognize That Persecution Validates My Faith

As I already mentioned, because you're a Christian, the enemy won't stop to pursue you. He will hunt you down. He will try to throw anything at you to slow you down or even trip you up. I wish I could tell you how my parents were so disappointed and wanted to disown me when I became a Christian. But such is not the case. In fact, they were so happy because they knew then that I left the Jehovah's Witnesses who they disliked very much. But I know a missionary from my former church in Australia who was disowned by his parents. When his parents learned that he turned to Christ and left his parent's religion, he was asked to move out of their house. He ended up living alone until God called him to be a missionary to Africa.

But I experienced persecution too when I was still living in Australia. I happened to help another missionary in church, whose name is John, in giving out gospel tracts to people on the street. I remember we did it every Thursday night. It was the busiest night in Australia because the stores closed late like 10 pm. On other days, all stores closed as early as 5 pm. In fact, no stores were open on Sundays. Some of you are saying "That's weird." But I read it's different now.

Anyway, we were standing on this street, and people were passing us by and we were handing out gospel tracts.

Then, I saw coming down the road was this guy, a tall, lanky guy, in leather jacket, with spiked hair and yellow teeth.

I always saw him with his friends on Thursday night and when they passed us by they would just laugh at John and me. But on this particular night, this lanky guy, who seemed to be their leader, suddenly stopped in front of me, took the tract and then crumpled it in his hand. I was surprised, of course.

Then, he nudged me a little bit and with his face just inches from mine, in a raspy voice said to me sternly, “How many people have taken this tract you’re giving out?” I said quite softly, “Your breath stinks”. Just kidding. What I said was, “Quite a few.” Then, he mumbled something I don’t remember anymore and threatened me and left. My friend John then tried to encourage me and reminded me that I would always expect things like that to happen.

When things like this happen, they validate your faith. They give you the assurance that your faith is real, that Jesus is in you. Just like that guy who I encountered; many people hate Christians just because they are Christians. It’s hard to explain why they behave like that. The only explanation is because they don’t like Jesus. And so, they hate anyone who represents him. Jesus says in **Matthew 10:22a “You will be hated by everyone because of me.”** It comes with the turf as they say.

Because we are followers of Jesus, things that happened to Jesus will happen to us as well. We will share in his sufferings as the Bible says. In fact, Jesus says in **Matthew 10:24, “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master.”** Also in **John 15, he says, “A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”**

So, we cannot escape it. Yes, we can pray for persecution to stop but it’s better to pray for perseverance in the face of persecution.

Because I don't think persecution will ever disappear.

Another principle to keep in mind in the face of persecution is

2. Know that God is in Control Despite Persecution

When troubles come, one thing that may enter our mind is that God doesn't love us or doesn't care about us. Let me tell you though that you may not always be able to see God's hand, but you can always trust his heart. The Bible tells us that God is good all the time. Everything he allows to happen in our lives he promises to work it out for our good.

In Romans 8:28, we read "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

God never takes his eyes from you. You are the apple of his eye. In Zephaniah 3:17, it says, "The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing."

God's love for you is never-ending. It will not change. It doesn't depend on what you have done or what you have not done. It doesn't depend on your performance. He will continue to love you no matter what. That's why he sent the Lord Jesus Christ to die for you on the cross despite your sins. The Bible says, "But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." (Romans 5:8) And so, when troubles come, when problems arise, when persecution strikes, don't think that God has forgotten you or he is punishing you. There's a purpose in everything that happens in your life. You may not understand why, but just trust in the Father heart of God because he knows what he is doing.

One of the stories in the Bible that has encouraged me greatly in my early walk as a Christian is the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

These three young bright Jewish guys were made administrators over the province of Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. One day, the king made a huge image of gold which he set up somewhere in Babylon and ordered all people to bow down before it at the sound of the horn, flute, harp, and the like. The three young men, however, didn't bow down because they believed it was idolatry. Upon hearing of this, the king got angry and ordered them burned in a blazing furnace. He even commanded his soldiers to increase the heat seven times. So, after tying them, the soldiers threw the three men into the furnace.

The king and his soldiers, however, saw the young men walking around the furnace unbound and unharmed and a fourth man was with them. One of the soldiers said that he looked like a son of the gods.

Immediately, the king asked the three young men to come out and then acknowledged that the God of the Jews rescued them.

In this story we see that God himself was with the three young men as they went through the fire. God never left their side while death stared directly at their faces. This story has encouraged my heart several times in the past when I was going through some fiery trials in my own life. I have taken comfort in the fact that God would always be there, interested in what was going in my life and ready to give me his grace and peace in the midst of difficulties. In Isaiah 43:1-2, this is God's promise,

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze."

I like also the way the three young men responded to King Nebuchadnezzar upon knowing that they were going to be thrown into the furnace.

In Daniel 3:16-18, this is what we read,

“O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

These verses sum up nicely what I’ve been telling you this morning. These three young men knew that it was God who would fight for them that’s why they could say that they need not defend themselves. And they so trusted God that they wouldn’t bow to the wishes of the King even if that meant losing their own lives.

From the story of these three young men, we also glean a very important principle. The principle that says “Do not avenge yourselves”.

When persecuted, let God take control of the situation. Don’t take matters in your own hands. God has already figured it out. Just trust in God because he is in control.

Finally, you can persevere if you

3. Believe that God Blesses those Who Are Persecuted

God promises a blessing to everyone who is persecuted and that means to every Christian because as we’ve seen already, every Christian will suffer persecution.

In Mark 10:29-31, Jesus makes clear the kind of blessing every persecuted Christian will receive, “Yes,” Jesus replied, “and I assure you that everyone who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or property, for my sake and for the Good News, will receive now in return a hundred times as many houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and property—along with persecution. And in the world to come that person will have eternal life.

But many who are the greatest now will be least important then, and those who seem least important now will be the greatest then.”

Jesus is saying that we will receive a blessing on earth and another blessing in heaven. As I mentioned already, Christians could be disowned by their own families and friends. And their properties could even be taken away by people. Years ago, I read about this church in London whose property was being taken over by the city council in order to transform it into a hotel or something for the London Olympics. The irony of it is that the council has allowed the construction of a huge multi-story mega-million Muslim center close to the Olympic site.

Jesus, nevertheless, has promised that though you may lose your loved ones or properties, you would gain so much more. What he is saying is that if you are persecuted you will be received by your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, no questions asked. That is what happened to the early Christians like Paul and Peter and James. They would run to the houses of other believers for protection and provision. You see, fellow Christians will provide you support and encouragement. They will be your second family.

So, for example, you are being persecuted by your wife because of your faith/ and not because you forgot her birthday, you can run and take refuge at Kuya Elvin and Ate Bebutte’s home where they will feed you both spiritually and physically. And this is true all over the world. Wherever you may be, Christians are ready, willing, and able to take you in in your time of need.

Earthly blessing is good enough, but heavenly blessing is much, much better. Jesus says he will give you the Crown of Life. In other words, he will give you eternal life in the world to come. Although in reality that eternal life started when you became a Christian. But what He is saying is that when you die your soul will go to heaven.

In other words, as the beatitude says, yours will be the Kingdom of Heaven. Ultimately, that is the greatest blessing of all because you will be with God forever and the Bible says that he is our great reward.

The early Christians eagerly looked forward to this and that's why they endured all the pain, the sorrow, the hardships brought on by persecution. In the book of Hebrews chapter 11:35-38 it says that they "were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground."

So, folks, they were willing to suffer and die for their faith in exchange for the privilege of seeing Jesus face to face. Of course, this is still happening today. Millions of Christians around the world are being persecuted and killed for their faith. We're aware of that and that's why in our prayer meeting, we pray for the persecuted church around the world. And this is an invitation and a reminder, please join us every Wednesday night, 7:30 PM. You can go to our web site and click the link to join.

Here in the U.S. itself, something similar took place years back. During the Columbine High School shooting, one of the killers pointed a gun at the face of one student and asked, "Do you believe in God?" Frightened, the student said "Yes" nevertheless, and she was shot.

Are we willing to take the same stand if that happened to us? Let us be reminded of Jesus' promise in **Matthew 10:39, "Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it."**

Folks, you will find life in Jesus. He will give you the crown of life if you persevere under trial. That's my prayer for you and for me. That we will always take a stand for Jesus no matter what.

And to close, let me give you another verse to hold on to: "So if you are suffering in a manner that pleases God, keep on doing what is right, and trust your lives to the God who created you, for he will never fail you." (1 Peter 4:19).