

The Persecuted Church

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[0 : 0 0] My name is Matthew Todd. For those who don't know me, I'm a member of the church here at St. Silas, and I did a ministry traineeship with St. Silas last year. So we're resuming our series called The Living Church, which we're looking at different aspects of church life and kind of how they apply to us.

So it's very practical. We are doing Daniel 6. Oh, there we go. Hello. We're doing Daniel 6, but it's not what you'd call a detailed exposition of Daniel 6. We're using it as our biblical authority to kind of look at what the Bible has to say to us about the persecuted church.

So just as a sort of caveat, you know, there's a lot more that could be said that I won't be saying this evening, but I do hope that what you hear is helpful. So thank you very much to Gordon for leading, and thank you for that very dramatic reading.

Hopefully that set it all up nicely. And let's get to it. So there's four points I want to make this evening, and they're all about expectations. Expect persecution.

Expect enemies. Expect hardship. And hopefully there's still light at the end of the tunnel. Expect final rescue. We will be going quite deep into the darkness, but I promise you, stick with it.

[1 : 1 2] It gets better. So expectations matter a lot, don't they? Expectations are what make us bitterly disappointed, and expectations are what make us pleasantly surprised.

In fact, modern psychology says that our state of happiness is largely based on our expectations of what we deserve. So it doesn't matter if you have a better quality of life than 90% of the world at large.

You can still live your whole life feeling like a victim. I would imagine many of us have had an experience that really challenged us and changed our expectations for daily life permanently.

I certainly had such an experience when I delivered music therapy in a Romanian orphanage in 2012. I'm just going to read you a little bit that I wrote for my blog. I'm going to be honest with you. I hadn't actually read that blog since I wrote it.

I hadn't really been able to bring myself back there. And in preparing this, I thought, it's time. So this is what I wrote kind of near the end of my time in Romania. My observation for today is that the children and many of the staff seem so inexplicably happy.

[2 : 1 6] I'm reminded of that wonderful moment from A Muppet's Christmas Carol. Brilliant film. Ebenezer Scrooge says, What right of you to be merry? You're poor enough. And his nephew Fred replies, What right of you to be miserable?

You're rich enough. That's a good point. We've got so much more than these folk in our cynical little nation. Not just money, but opportunities, relative safety, education, and, if we're English speakers, the potential for communicating with millions of people who share our language.

Are we happier for it? No. We're miserable. What's wrong with us? Yes, the weather's bad, but hey, being cold and wet's not without its advantages, because it was really hot in Romania.

Yes, there's the British temperament, so change it. Go out there. Give someone a high five and say, Child, do it. Go. Do it now. And I'm told some people did when they read that.

End quote. So, expect persecution is our first thing. Our expectations are so important. Let's consider what Daniel's expectations might have been at the beginning of this chapter.

[3 : 23] This is by no means the first time that Daniel has had to suffer for his faith. At age 15 or even younger, he would have experienced the brutal siege and sack of his home.

He was ripped up from his family, who were almost certainly noble and godly, by the way, and deported to a foreign land. We can only imagine the pain and distress that young Daniel would have experienced, would have felt as he experienced the judgment for sins that possibly he and even his family had no part in.

But he must have listened to the prophets and let God's word sink deep into his heart. When God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah, he said, Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile.

Pray to the Lord for it. Because if it prospers, you will prosper too. And that's Jeremiah 29, verse 7. And throughout Daniel's long life, we see him putting these words into action.

Look at verse 3, if you've still got your Bible open. Now, Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps, by his exceptional qualities, that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom.

[4 : 34] At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent.

Daniel has always worked exceptionally hard. His character is faultless. There are no skeletons in his closet. And yet he has met constant opposition. He's narrowly escaped death on more than one occasion.

And now Daniel is likely in his 70s or even his 80s. I don't know if you think about that when you hear the well-known children's story of Daniel in the lion's den. It's a pensioner being thrown down there. We might expect that he deserves a quiet and favored retirement.

But his greatest test is yet to come. Look at verse 5 with me. Finally, these men said, We will never find any basis for charges against this man, Daniel, unless it has something to do with the law of his God.

So these administrators and satraps went as a group to the king and said, May King Darius live forever. The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisors, and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or human being during the next 30 days except you, your majesty, shall be thrown into the lion's den.

[5 : 50] Now, your majesty, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed. So King Darius put the decree in writing.

Daniel's enemies know that they need to attack his faith. If we're Christians here today, then we need to swallow this reality. Our faith in Jesus is not just weird to the secular world.

It is deeply offensive. Even if you're an entirely unoffensive person, and you might be, if you seek to imitate Christ in all you do, it's only a matter of time before your words, actions, and attitudes cause some serious conflict.

If you're not expecting persecution, you may need to adjust your expectations. Secondly, let's think for a moment. Expect enemies.

I have a good friend who's a minister, and the Scottish Sun wrote an article on him recently. This man had a very rough upbringing and committed a crime at 19 that landed him with a prison sentence.

[6 : 58] He was dramatically and wonderfully converted near the beginning of his long sentence and spent many years living out the life of a follower of Jesus within the prison system. He's now a fully reformed character who has dedicated his life to preaching the word, caring for his family, and meaningfully preventing others from making the mistakes he made as a young man.

An inspiring transformation story? Not according to the Scottish Sun. They wrote a scathing article describing him as a fiend, and were completely incredulous about his ordination.

The very fact that the church would ordain a man with such a history was considered as proof that the whole Christian thing was a total farce. I don't want to get sidetracked by this, but we must be as clear as Daniel was that we work within a society with a different worldview and religion from our own.

This needs to be stated because there are so many Christian values residual in our society, it can be easy to make our peace with it and think to ourselves, it's not perfect, but it's close enough. Friends, it is not close enough.

A society without Christ as Lord, or indeed a Christianity without Christ as Lord, is without grace, without mercy, and ultimately without hope.

[8 : 16] Identity politics, post-modernism, neo-Marxism, it is a subtle and incredibly complex, but we really, really, really need to see it for what it is. It looks kind, compassionate, and loving, but there's an idolatrous root in there that is insidious.

It will support and encourage you until you cross the line. Then it will throw you to the lions. If you don't expect enemies, you may need to adjust your expectations.

It's going to get darker, and then it's going to get lighter. Stick with it. Expect hardship. Of course, if you want to see persecution of God's people in more visible ways, there's plenty of it in the wider world.

The OMF, Overseas Mission Fellowship, was meeting here yesterday, and I was doing sound for them, so this is very fresh in my mind. There's an account of a man who is a father of a Chinese pastor.

So he writes this. It's quite a long quote, but I'm going to read it all. My father would kneel and pray for courage. He faced two paths. He could express his willingness to change and join the government's three-self church, or he could accept the imprisonment and separation of his family.

[9 : 32] My father prayed for ten days, during which time no one came to bother him. He started to think that the government might change its mind about arresting him. At about 11 o'clock on the night of April the 19th, 1958, police came from my father.

They knocked politely on the door first. Two policemen came from the local ward, stood outside. They, quote, invited, unquote, my father for a quick meeting at the local Public Security Bureau office.

There, several policemen were waiting for him. They read his arrest warrant and handcuffed him. He was charged with being an active revolutionary. At the same time, a group of soldiers ransacked our house, sweeping copies of the Bible, hymnals, and other Christian reading material onto the floor.

They found nothing out of the ordinary for a preacher. No gold nuggets, no anti-communist materials. At 4.30 in the morning, the soldiers left with a truckload of books and everything of value. My father did not come home again for 21 years and eight months.

Mother, now the wife of an active counter-revolutionary, was stripped of her job as street committee director. My family was forced out, and eight of us crammed into a tiny 15-square-meter house.

[10 : 51] Now, if we don't expect that this could happen in our time and our country, we may need to adjust our expectations. And if we don't realize that it's happening right now all over the world to our Christian brothers and sisters, we need to quickly get clued up on that.

When Daniel's friends refused to bow to the golden statue earlier in the book of Daniel, it was quite clear that they were making a stand, quite literally. It was something they refused to do, like the Chinese pastor who refuses to announce his faith and faces the consequences.

Daniel's challenge was much more subtle. It was about what he did, not what he did not do. If our government declared that we could not pray to God for a single month, how would we react?

There would be protest, I'm sure, but if it was a choice between that and a den of lions, I suspect it would be quite polite and mild in our protests.

We might argue that it was indeed a dangerous step away from freedom of religious expression and was likely to create further tensions between religious communities. But would we go ahead and do it anyway?

[11 : 59] I hope that many of us would, but the evidence does not point to that at the moment. It is increasingly risky to pray in schools or in public places. Nurses are not allowed to pray for patients.

Teachers are not allowed to pray for children. It's understandable, but is it right? We're expected to acknowledge that our God is not really God, only a concept we've created to bring us comfort, not one that might work for everyone.

You know, if we continually refuse to acknowledge that, there will be unpleasant consequences. Just one example, a comedy program which myself and Lisa enjoy had a Christmas episode.

It was a real low of an otherwise brilliant series. In this episode, the characters go on a magical journey to discover the true meaning of Christmas. As each of them doubts the answer can be found, they're ejected from the journey one by one.

The Christian character claims to know the true meaning, and she is the first to be ejected. Eventually, they unanimously come to the, quote, inspiring, unquote, conclusion that Christmas means so many different things to different people that it is effectively meaningless.

[13 : 09] And we allow ourselves to believe that it has meaning, and that's what makes it special. I think we were all supposed to be delighted with that conclusion. Don't get me wrong, you know, we should live in an attitude of thankfulness that we can still worship relatively freely in our land.

But on the other hand, we must acknowledge that we are in terrible danger. We're in danger of making peace with a Christianity where Christ is not Lord.

We do so out of ignorance, out of fear, or even just out of politeness. But whatever our motive, the destination is lethal. I don't say this out of desire to be sensationalist, but a time is coming very soon where we will have to risk the lion's den.

In the meantime, expect that the gospel will divide and offend. A time will come when we need to stand up and say, Jesus is my Lord. His work is my priority.

The Bible is my moral compass. And this wishy-washy, non-offensive, state-sponsored Christianity, it has no place in our land, and I'm sick of it.

[14 : 20] Things might get hard. If you don't expect that, you might just need to adjust your expectations. Expect final rescue.

Daniel's story is not all about us. It also points forward to an incredible rescue by another man who descended into a pit and came out again having defeated his enemies.

Jesus' death and resurrection defeated sin and death once and for all. If we truly believe this, it should totally change our perspective on suffering in this lifetime.

In Daniel's case, there is an ultimate restoration. And instead of being suppressed in silence, God is glorified. Look at verse 25 with me.

Then King Darius wrote to all the nations and peoples of every language in all the earth, may you prosper greatly. I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear it and reverence the God of Daniel.

[15 : 26] For he is the living God and he endures forever. His kingdom shall not be destroyed. His dominion will never end. He rescues and he saves. He performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth.

He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions. So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian. God may rescue in this age, but he will certainly rescue in the age to come.

If you're suffering for Christ today, what do you expect from the treasure you're storing up in heaven? The chances are your expectations are far too low.

John sees a vision of an enormous golden city which points us towards our future with God in Revelation. The ultimate restoration of Jerusalem that God promised his people would be unlike any other.

They were expecting another political and military restoration. God says, adjust your expectations. You don't need to look it up, but in Revelation chapter 21, in verse 3, we read, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

[16 : 45] He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God. This is the final destination. God and his children are finally united.

And what does that mean? He goes on to tell us in verse 4, He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more and neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away.

In verse 10, it says, And he carried me away in the spirit to a great high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God its radiance like a most rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal.

It had a great high wall with twelve gates and at the gates twelve angels and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed. And so it goes on, describing a dazzling, glorious, magnificent city.

We can gloss over that. We think, yeah, yeah, golden city, all that. But don't lose for a moment the significance of what John is seeing. His expectation might have been to see a garden, a new Eden.

[17 : 54] But no, God is not going to erase history and start again. He's going to redeem it. Every material, every dimension, every detail describes a redeemed people of God.

It takes their messy, broken history and turns it into something so wonderful it defies explanation. The verses we read above are a victory cry and the enemies that have been utterly routed, pain and death.

The first decree of the glorious victor is that evil is no more. The former things are wiped clean and the new king is the very definition of majesty and splendor and glory. Consider for a moment the size of this city.

Twelve thousand stadia, which is, wait for it, 1,380 miles. I mean, just think about that for a moment. Much further than the entire length of Britain, including Shetland and as high as it is long.

Thousands upon thousands of stories high. 250 times taller than Mount Everest. I mean, it's not even science fiction, it's fantasy. Yet, even if it's not literal, it's true.

[19 : 01] I don't know about you, but I want to see this city so bad. Furthermore, the whole city is radiant. Every part of it is rare and precious. Its value is incalculable.

If we were to see such a city today, I doubt that our minds would even be able to process the glory. I expect Daniel felt that he had been robbed of his childhood and his home, that blessed by God as he was, there were many good things that this present world offers that he was never able to experience.

Joining hands with his parents at the dinner table, knowing that he was loved, that he was safe, having a laugh with his friends after a hard day of work, knowing his position in society was secure, holding his own child full of hope and joy for the future they might enjoy together in a loving home.

Maybe your own loss of innocence or the vision of a future you lost still fills your mind. Or maybe you've managed to hide it deep down in the darkest recesses of your memory, afraid to face the reality that it is forever gone.

Either way, take this to heart. Nothing good that you have or might have experienced in this life will be lost in the next. Yes, it will be different.

[20 : 29] And no, we can't fully understand how God will accomplish this. But we must believe that God knows what a true home looks like and feels like better than we do.

Every good and perfect gift is from God. How could the place where his presence is felt in all its fullness be any less than good and perfect?

Francis Thompson wrote his great poem The Hound of Heaven visualizing God endlessly pursuing us. At the end of the poem the Hound of Heaven wins the chase and speaks.

All which I took from thee I did but take not for thy harms but just that thou might seek it in my arms. All which thy child's mistake fancies as lost I have stored for thee at home.

Rise clasp my hand and come. Friends, our ultimate destination is to be forever with our creator our father and our savior.

[21 : 43] The one who is the giver of every good thing and who has loved us before the foundation of the earth. The one who knows us intimately has prepared a place for us.

And if you don't expect that to be worth it you might just need to adjust your expectations. Amen. Amen. the bow