

Summer's in the Air – May 4, 2008

We look around us and we see all the signs of summer — There are numerous diets being advertised in order to get in shape for the summer... traffic reports are beginning to include shore traffic... gas prices have risen... those who work in the schools are counting the days to the end of the school year... vacations are being scheduled — and I'm sure that you can think of many other signs that indicate that summer is almost on us. For many, summer is already here mentally, if not according to the calendar.

Another sign that you might see or will soon see — are the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons who use the warmer weather to go door to door in order to proclaim their false gospel. While many people are bothered or annoyed by them — they might get doors slammed in their faces... people might not answer their doors... or some might even ridicule them — that is about the extent of it.

We generally do not read about JW's or Mormons being persecuted for their faith — being arrested and put in jail... or even killed. In fact, we do not read about other religious groups being persecuted for their faith — I sure it happens to some extent — but not so much that it makes headlines — and not to the degree that it happens to Christians.

Around the world there are continuing reports of Christians being arrested, thrown in jail, and even killed. As I stated on another occasion, more Christians were killed in the 20th Century than in the previous 19 centuries combined — and the trend continues now into the 21st century. I believe that I read that over 100,000 Christians were killed last year.

Countries that have made the news recently where there is persecution of Christians are the Sudan, India, and as always, China. These things often happen as Christians are in the process of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ — but more often than not — it happens simply because they are known as Christians. In other words Christians are persecuted simply because of who they are.

As we read through the annals of church history we would find that this is nothing new — in fact, it has happened so often that we should not be surprised when we hear about it. What we should be surprised at, is that it doesn't happen more frequently or with even more intensity. Turn with me to our Gospel lesson from this morning from John 16.

We began the lesson in Chapter 15 — with Jesus telling his Apostles again that the Helper... the Holy Spirit would come. As we saw last week — these words of Jesus are part of his words to the Apostles on the last night of his earthly life. Jesus had celebrated the Last Supper with his Apostles... he had identified his betrayer... now he has given them some final instructions.

In Chapter 14 he tells them about the coming of the Holy Spirit — 16,17: *“And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever; the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.”*

Then he tells them again here in 15, — but notice the context — 15:26-16:4 (READ). What Jesus is telling them is that, yes, the Holy Spirit... the Helper is going to come — but that things are going to happen to them as they bear witness to him — as they tell others about him. We see that Jesus tells them what the Holy Spirit will do —

“He will testify of Me.”

Going back to Chapter 14, this is similar to what Jesus has already told them — *“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.”*

The things that the Holy Spirit will testify of and bring to remembrance are the things that Jesus has told them about, among other things — as to why he came — that he would die for the sins of those who believe in him... that he would rise from the dead and ascend into heaven — along with the many other things that Jesus taught his Apostles. This is the work of the Holy Spirit — as the Apostles fulfill what Jesus has told them they will do — *“And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning.”*

You might remember that some of the last words that Jesus said to the Apostles were when he commissioned them: *“And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”*

Similar words were then said to the Apostles prior to the ascension: *“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”*

Jesus is telling them that as they do this work — bearing witness — that they can expect to be persecuted — 16:1,2 (READ). Jesus tells them they can expect opposition... they can expect difficulties... they can expect to be thrown out of the synagogue... they can expect to be killed — so don't be surprised when it happens.

But notice the interesting thing that he tells them as to the attitude of those who do these things — *“yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service...”* Jesus tells them that the reason that they will do these things is because they don't really know God — that God is not their Father.

I am reminded of a number of times where this is played out in the Scriptures. Of course we think of the Pharisees, Scribes and the other religious leaders during the time of Christ. They had heard of his miracles and they had seen some of them — the man born blind... the raising of Lazarus from the dead... the two feedings of the multitudes — and yet, they would not believe... they could not believe — because God was not their father. Instead they conspired — and were successful — in having Jesus put to death.

Another example is that of the Apostle Paul — before he became Paul — when he was still Saul. In Acts chapter 7 we read of the stoning of Stephen — the first martyr of the Christian faith. He was stoned for standing for the truth of Jesus Christ.

Read Acts 7, as we have in our Bible Study, and see how the Holy Spirit moved Stephen to give an account of Israel's history — to bear witness to Jesus — finally telling them this: *“You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers...”* —

It was after this that the people stoned him. We read: *“Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul...”*

Then at the beginning of the Acts 8:1 we read: *“Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.”*

We see that Saul, a Pharisee was very zealous — thinking that he was pleasing God in what he was doing — persecuting what he perceived to be the Christian heresy. And just prior to his vision of the Lord Jesus Christ, we read in Acts 9:1, 2 *“Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”*

This was who Saul, now called Paul, was. Listen how he describes himself in Philippians 3: *“If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.”*

And in 1 Corinthians 15, in describing the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, Paul says: 8 *“Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”*

In the name of God he persecuted the church of God. In the name of god — with a little “g” — however one may define god — many today persecute the Christians — and in many different ways. It could be because the god of money. Consider why many make mockery of the Lord’s Day — to them it is just another day... another day to work and make money. And there is persecution to those who want to honor the Lord’s Day by worshiping and resting. Another example, is that I’ve heard of Christians not being promoted in the workplace because of their faith.

There are a variety of other reasons why people persecute Christians — thinking that they are pleasing God in one way or the other — you can possibly think of some. They can range from ridicule to arrest, torture and death... But we find that Jesus says — don’t be surprised. They do these things because, as Jesus said: *“they have not known the Father nor Me.”*

And if God is not their Father — then we know that Satan is their father. This is what Jesus told the Pharisees and Scribes. In John 8, Jesus said to them, *“If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me. “Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.”*

This is the foundation of why there is persecution — because those who are not Christians have the devil as their father — these are the only two options that we find in the Scriptures. We either belong to God through the

Lord Jesus Christ or we belong to Satan. And if we belong to God, we can expect persecution. As we bear witness to God, people will be against us — individually and as a church. We can count on it. Just consider how towns and cities are making it more difficult for churches to build.

Other than the facts that Jesus said that it would happen... and the fact that it happened to him... and the fact that it has happened to millions — in my mind, one of the most convincing reasons for persecution against us is found in 2 Corinthians 2:14-16 *“Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things?”*

This is such a powerful passage — it says that we as Christians have an aroma — to other Christians we have *the aroma of life leading to life*. But to the non-Christian we have *the aroma of death leading to death*. Here it is in a nutshell — this is why there is persecution of the Christian by the non-Christian — because we have the aroma of their death about us.

What we see from all of this for us as Christians is that if we are being faithful witnesses to the Lord Jesus Christ, then we can expect persecution. Guaranteed! Here in the U.S. we really cannot expect anything violent — arrest, torture or persecution. But we can expect vocal opposition... we can expect ridicule... and we can expect some hard times — in our neighborhoods... in our workplace... in our schools ... in the media — where ever we might be.

But we have to see the connection — If you are proclaiming and living the gospel then you will be persecuted — he says: *“But these things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them.”*