*DEVOTIONS*

February 27 – March 4

*Blessed are the persecuted*

**Monday, February 27 John 15:18-21**

*“The people of the world will hate you because you belong to me”*

Jesus explains the hatred of the world as a continuation of the hatred he personally witnessed throughout his public ministry. Jesus has been hated because as the light, he exposes the world’s deeds and unmasks them as evil. Because the disciples are now separated from the world by virtue of their faith in Jesus, they qualify for similar treatment. As Jesus and his disciples are to be known for their love, the world is known for its hatred.

The disciples are not of the world, for Jesus *“chose them out of the world”* not to leave the world, but to continue his mission in the world as a new community of love. And the separation of the disciples from the world makes them objects of its hatred. The world loves only its own, those who conform to its spirit, accept its values, and worship its false gods. This hatred of the world is sin grounded in their ignorance of God for which they have no excuse. They do not know the Father even though the whole of Jesus’ life and ministry, all his work, has been a revelation of his Father. Therefore, their hatred is directed at God the Father, as well as at his Son.

*Help me to love those who hate me, Lord, because of my love for you. Amen.*

**Tuesday, February 28 Matthew 10:34-37**

*“Your enemies will be right in your own household”*

Jesus Christ is the most divisive Person in the world. When we know about him we are either for him or against him. When God confronts us in the person of Christ it is not as if we can accept certain aspects of Christ and reject others. When confronted with a Person we must either accept or reject him, and the decision we make puts our very lives at stake. We are “playing for keeps.” People shove God out of their lives because they have other gods, because God interferes with what they want. Ultimately, they reject God and his Christ because the way of Christ is too demanding. It means giving up this life in order to secure the next.

The “sword” is a metaphorical sword, as illustrated by Jesus’ rebuke of those who took up actual swords to defend him in the Garden of Gethsemane. Here it is a metaphor of separation between those who believe and those who don’t. Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah is a divider between people, including those in one’s own family. Before Jesus’ own family finally came to recognize his true identity and mission, they opposed him.

*I pray for those in my family, Lord, who do not know you. Amen.*

**Wednesday, March 1 Acts 5:40-42**

*“Worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus”*

Peter and his fellow apostles have been performing miracles of healing among the people in Jerusalem. The Jewish religious leaders became jealous of their popularity and had them put in prison. But during the night an angel of God opened the doors of the jail, brought them out, and told them to return to the temple courts and continue sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. Hearing this, the Jewish high council had the apostles arrested and brought before them.

The council threatened the apostles with death if they didn’t stop talking about Jesus, but the apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than men!” The council became furious and wanted them killed, but a Pharisee named Gamaliel advised them to be cautious: “If their purpose is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men.” This advice persuaded the council to drop the death penalty, but it didn’t prevent a beating. The apostles’ response was to rejoice, for their suffering allowed them to demonstrate their loyalty to Christ.

*I will remain loyal to you, Lord, even when it brings about opposition. Amen.*

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**Thursday, March 2 2 Timothy 3:10-12**

*“You know how much suffering and persecution I have endured”*

Paul’s writing about his own life and experiences show how a life of faithful service to Jesus Christ brings suffering, and it provides a model for young Timothy to follow in his ministry for Christ. Paul is not bragging. He is showing where his values are, values that are not optional or relative but of absolute importance in the life of the Lord’s servant. Not only Paul’s teaching, but also his character and way of living distinguishes him as a faithful follower of Jesus. This also needs to be true of Timothy, and of us.

Although Paul mentions that the Lord rescued him from these persecutions, as the Lord will rescue us from ours, he makes the point that “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” Here he moves from his own experience to that of Christians in general. Paul is making it clear to Timothy that persecution is not exceptional for those who live a life that is godly; it should be expected.

*Suffering for your name, Lord, confirms my commitment to you. Amen.*

**Friday, March 3 Hebrews 11:24-27**

*“He chose to share the oppression of God’s people”*

Moses chose his biological family (the Israelites) over his adoptive family (Pharaoh) at great personal cost: loss of wealth, giving up of status, and banishment; and, when he stood before Pharaoh and demanded that he let the people of God leave Egypt, opposition and threats. Moses experienced the same kind of opposition experienced later by Christ – rejection faced by a prophet standing on the side of God, proclaiming the Word of the Lord in boldness against an unbelieving people. Moses endured in his faith because he paid attention to the unseen God rather than to a visible king.

As contemporary readers, we need to be careful not to think of Moses and other “heroes of the faith” as being vastly different from us. If this is our perspective we miss the whole point of these stories: this bold life of faith is normal for the people of God. The Bible’s intent is to call struggling, sometimes bumbling Christians to live courageously by faith. He calls us – with all our habits and hang-ups, warts and worries – to action.

*With your help, Lord, I will be bold in living for you. Amen.*

**Saturday, March 4 Matthew 5:1-12**

*“Blessed are the persecuted”*

According to *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, the word *martyr* has come to mean “one who has proved the strength and genuineness of his faith in Christ by undergoing a violent death.”In this sense, Stephen was the first martyr for Christ (Acts 6:8 – 7:60). Countless numbers of Christians have followed him in dying for Christ through the centuries. But even more Christians have been *persecuted.* What does it mean to be *persecuted for righteousness sake?* It means *to be persecuted for being like the Lord Jesus Christ himself.* Jesus said that those who are persecuted for being like him will be blessed, and furthermore, those who are like Christ will be persecuted*.*

The promise to those who suffer persecution is the same as the promise of the first beatitude where God blesses those who realize their need for him – both are blessed because they belong to the kingdom of heaven. To make God our primary allegiance, and then to live publicly and openly as a disciple of his Son, will bring persecution, for the ways of God are opposed to the ways of our contemporary culture.

*Though I be persecuted for following you, Lord, I will not turn back. Amen.*