Responding to Persecution

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[0:00] We'll begin our time together by asking you a question.

I can think of a couple of instances.
Some of you are laughing and maybe you've been there before. You guys know I'm a big sports fan and baseball is my favorite sport. My dad grew up in Baltimore, so he is a big Orioles fan.
His father, my grandfather, is a big Orioles fan. So I'm a big Orioles fan as well, but I also love the Royals because I grew up in Kansas City. So I've always told people, you know, the Orioles are my 1A and the Royals are my 1B.
The only time I won't root for the Royals is when they're playing the Orioles. But I love the Royals more than most people who that's their favorite team. I know more about them than most people who that's their team.
[1:17] So the only time I would go to a Royals game dressed in non-Royals gear was when the Orioles were playing. And, man, Royals fans are not very nice to the opposing team, especially when the Royals are doing good.

Now, for years they were terrible and nobody cared, you know, what you showed up in. But if the Royals were good, I mean, the things that they would shout at me and my dad on the way to the stadium, it was just terrible.
You know, and if you've been there, it's a big parking lot. People tailgate. They get drunk and they say some really awful things. And the Chiefs are worse. I wouldn't dare go to a Chiefs game in the opposing team's gear.
You know what I'm saying? But maybe you've been in a more serious situation where it's just not comfortable to be in that environment. It's certainly not comfortable to be the one who stands against the crowd.
Martin Luther, many of you guys know about him, the great Reformer, and the part where he was summoned to appear before Emperor Charles V back in 1521 at the imperial, we say, diet, diet of the Holy Roman Empire.
[2:34] Luther, if you remember, had been a fierce critic of the Catholic Church and its abuseful use of indulgences. And then he had nailed the 95 theses to the Wittenberg Castle Church door.

And that began to cause a spark that had been going to really flame up. And especially in Germany, their anger towards the Roman, Rome and the Pope and the Catholic Church and their selling of indulgences and all of that bad stuff.
So the emperor was determined to put an end to this uprising. And so he called him to worms or worms. I'm not going to use the German stuff.
I'm not going to say diet of worms. I'm going to say diet of worms. Does that sound good? That's how we say it in Oklahoma. And it's easier to remember that way. The emperor, again, was determined to put an end to this.
And Luther had been told that he would receive safe conduct by the emperor to this diet, this meeting. But some of his closest friends had told him, you know, hey, listen, they did this same thing for John Huss about 100 years ago and he was burned at the stake.
[3:51] So they were advising him against going, but he decided that he was going to go anyways, despite what his closest friends advised him not to do.

He said this, even if there was as many devils in it as there were tiles on the roof, which I'm guessing there were a lot of tiles on the roof, the houses, he said, I will still go.
And so he appeared before the diet and he refused to recant all that he had written. He refused to take any of it back. I want to read to you what he said. I'm sure you've heard this before, but he said, unless I am convinced by the testimony of the scriptures or by clear reason, for I do not trust

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either in the pope or in the councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves.
I am bound by scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience.
I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand. May God help me. Amen. 1,500 years prior to this, another servant of the Lord stood trial for his life as well.
[5:04] But like Luther, Stephen stood solidly on the rock of divine revelation. And like Luther, his stand would alter the history of the church.

While Luther's trial did not end in his martyrdom, Stephen's did, as we will read here in just a moment. However, Stephen is not the one whom we should pity in this instance.
Death merely ushered him into the presence of the Lord. The ones whom we should pity actually are the ones who were his accusers, his persecutors.
They were so blinded by sin that their rage drove them to murder a man who spoke to them words of life and whose hope was that they would be saved like he was. And this is important for us to keep in mind as well.
How should we respond to persecution? Because in our society, there is a growing hostility towards Christianity, especially towards Christians who actually believe what the Bible says.
[6:04] You may have heard about this, but recently there was a class held at George Washington University, and it was entitled Christian Privilege. Have you heard that before?

There's a class at George Washington University, and it was about how Christians are privileged, which is ridiculous, right? Because just a few things that have happened here recently about Christians being persecuted and not privileged in our society.
You guys have probably heard about the wedding cake bakers in Oregon who were sued, the one in Colorado, and that case is still with the Supreme Court.
There will be a decision on that later on this year. And I'm hoping and I'm praying and I'm thinking it's going to turn out well for Christians. But, you know, they've had to pay lots of fees for lawyers. They've been sued. They've been fined. There is a venue owner in New York who would let their property be used, rented for weddings and for receptions and all those things.
[7:10] They, too, have been called Nazis. They've been called bigots. They've been sued like the others. And so this is happening right now.

Also, we see it in the hatred of our vice president. If you, I don't know that any of you watched The View, but I know that he was, he's also, he's often been a constant target of theirs just because he's a Christian who believes what the Bible teaches on things that they are in disagreement about.
He's just got a big target on his back. The NFL. If you remember, when Tim Tebow was playing in the NFL, they didn't like him kneeling. He got a lot of criticism from the media for praying before a game.
And then he was, if you remember, he used to wear eye black under his eyes and he would write Bible verses on it. And they told him that he couldn't do that anymore, which is crazy because that's, to me, freedom of speech.
But they allow all these players to kneel for the national anthem. And they say it's because they have freedom of speech. So are Christians really that privileged? I don't think so.
[8:15] And especially, you know, in our society now, I don't want to say that we don't have privileges here as Christians that other Christians don't have in other nations. Because certainly as Christians here, we have it a lot better than Christians in China or Christians in the Middle East, in India even, where there's severe persecution that results with them dying.

They're being martyred. And so really, is there a Christian privilege? No. And we go back on our history and we see all the men and women who have given their lives because of their faith in Jesus Christ and their refusal to refute their trust in him as Lord and Savior.
So it's nonsense. But Christians have been persecuted. Christians are being persecuted. Christians will be persecuted until the Lord comes back and he does what he does in that final judgment.
And then the saints will all be resurrected to an eternal life where there will be no sin. And all will be believing and trusting in Christ.
And so we won't face persecution in heaven, but we will face persecution here. So the question is, how should we respond when we face persecution like this?

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[9:38] And here in these verses, we'll see that Stephen provides an excellent example of an example for us to follow when we face persecution.

So the first thing we see is in verses 54 through the beginning of verse 55. And it says there, Now when they heard these things, they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him, but he was full of the Holy Spirit.
So here we see that Stephen was filled with the Spirit and not anger when he was facing his persecutors. Just remember, I know it's been a couple weeks, but Stephen has been brought before the Sanhedrin.
He's been brought before the Jewish rulers. And they've accused him of blasphemy. And he has gone through the Scriptures, and he has shown them that Jesus Christ is the Lord.
He is the Savior. And it's them who are truly on trial. It's them who face the wrath of God for their sins and their refusal to accept and receive their Savior.
[10:46] And that enraged them. So there it says, again, they were enraged, or many in your translations, it says that they were cut to the quick. And that's one word in the Greek. It's diaprio.

And it literally means to saw in half. Stephen's words were so convicting to them, it cut through their false self-righteous facade and exposed their hypocrisy and their spiritual deadness, and they couldn't stand it.
Have you ever been so angry that you've ripped your shirt in half? I don't know if you've been that angry before. Okay, some of you haven't. But that's the type of anger we're dealing with here.
They are really, really angry. But rather than repenting over the message that they heard, it says that they ground their teeth, or they gnashed their teeth at Stephen and his message.
These people's response to the gospel was to be filled with anger. Their hearts were hardened.
Repeated rejection of the gospel results in the progressive hardening of the heart and will ultimately result in outright antagonism toward the gospel of Jesus Christ.
[11:57] Turn in your Bibles to Hebrews chapter 3. And let's read verses 7 through 13 about this.
Hebrews chapter 3 and verses 7 through 13.

And there it says, Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years.
Therefore I was provoked with that generation and said, They shall go astray in their heart. They have not known my ways. As I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest.
Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But extort one another every day, as long as it is called today, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.
So here's Stephen's accusers. They'd heard the truth. Many of them, in fact, had heard Jesus teaching, and they had witnessed His miracles themselves.
[13:13] They had also heard the preaching of the apostles, and they had also seen the miracles that they performed. Stephen's message was an indictment against them, and they were overcome with anger by what he had to say.

John MacArthur, writing on this passage, says, This is a sobering reminder that when men persist in willfully hardening their hearts, God may step in and juditionally harden them as well.
Romans 1 comes to mind when I think of this, you know, where it says that basically the worst thing that can happen to a person is that God gives them what they want.
God gives them over to their passions of their flesh to do whatever they want to do. And what's crazy about all of this is that when God does that, He withholds His common grace from them, which means that their heart progressively gets hardened.
And then they get to the point where they look back at God, and it's like they're upset that God let them have what they wanted. They just grow in their hatred towards Him. You know, God, we don't want you.
[14:18] We want what we want to do. Okay, God allows them to do that. He withholds His grace as a result of that as well. They become hardened and hardened and hardened towards Him, and then they get to the point where they hate Him even more at the end than they did at the beginning.

And so ultimately, the crowd's response again to Stephen was to gnash their teeth at Him. This depicts what the Bible says that they're going to do for the rest of their eternity in hell.

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That they will be down there if they don't repent and if they haven't believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. Matthew 8, 11 through 12, Jesus warned the unbelieving Jews of this.
Many shall come from east and west and recline at the table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness. In that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.
Matthew 13, 41 through 42, again, He warned, the Son of Man will send forth His angels and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, those who commit lawlessness and will cast them into the furnace of fire.
[15:21] In that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The suffering of hell will include the endless frustration of those who will forever feel intense conviction for their sins and anger towards God as well.

They won't feel remorseful for their sins and they won't be repentant, obviously, of their sins, but they'll be angry at God for His judgment against them.
It will only intensify as they're there. Their anger against Him will only grow. There will be gnashing of teeth. Hell isn't going to be a party.
We've got to understand this. How many songs do you hear? Or you hear it in movies. People talk about, well, I'd rather, you know, hell's just going to be one great party. Heaven's going to be boring. And, you know, the Billy Joel song, I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints.
And you know that line, I'm sure. My dad was in radio. I heard a lot of these songs, so don't judge me for a listen. But you hear that song and you think, that may seem like the case now, but in eternity it's going to be the opposite.
[16:38] You know, there's not going to be any joy in hell. There's going to be crying there's going to be there's going to be gnashing of teeth. Hell is not a place where anybody would ever want to go.

It's a terrible, terrible place filled with hatred towards God. So they were filled with hate. Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit.
God's Word promises that the Spirit will provide grace and strength in times of persecution and crisis. Luke 12, 11 through 12 Jesus said, And when they bring you before the synagogue and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say.
For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say. So again, God promises that the Spirit will provide grace and strength in times of persecution and crisis for the Christian. Christians shouldn't then shy away from difficult situations. They must boldly communicate Christ in all circumstances believing that this promise is true, that the Holy Spirit will in that moment grant them the grace to face the consequences that they are or potentially incur as a result of their being in Christ.
[17:59] So how does this apply to us, this first point? Well, again, don't shy away from situations where you might be persecuted. Don't shy away from that.

Don't necessarily look for it, you know what I'm saying? But definitely when it comes your way, don't shy away from that. And again, don't return evil with evil.
Speak the truth in love and trust that the Holy Spirit will give you the words to say and the strength to endure whatever happens to you afterwards. The next thing we see here about how we should respond to persecution and following Stephen's example is that Stephen had spiritual insight while his persecutors were spiritually deaf and blind.
He had spiritual insight while his persecutors were spiritually deaf and blind. And the rest of verse 55 going through verse 57, it says, He gazed into heaven, he saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.
And he said, Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.
[19:12] So in the midst of these circumstances, this circumstance, Stephen saw the glory of God and he says that he saw Jesus standing at his right hand.

Now for the Sanhedrin, Stephen's vision and statement of what he saw was the last straw. They couldn't take it anymore. They didn't want to hear anymore what this man had to say.
They could no longer tolerate him, so they covered their ears and they rushed at him. Stephen's use of the phrase their Son of Man would have struck a nerve with the crowd that he was speaking

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with.
If you recall, like Stephen, Jesus was accused of blasphemy. He kept silent as false witnesses were brought to testify against him as well. Finally, in frustration, the high priest demanded that Jesus speak.
If you remember, he said to Jesus, I adjure you by the living God that you tell us whether you are the Christ, the Son of God. And Jesus said to him, You have said it yourself. Nevertheless, I tell you, hereafter, you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven.
[20:24] So no doubt these words would have been in the ears of some of those who heard Stephen and I think that's part of the reason why they wanted to cover their ears. That claim of Jesus to be the Son of God and the Son of Man who sits at the right hand of God caused the same reaction that Jesus received to Stephen.

They moved to execute Jesus just like they were now moving to execute Stephen. Stephen's vision asserted that what Jesus said back then was true because Stephen was seeing it and he was reporting to them what he saw and that was proof that what Jesus said to them was true.
They could either admit at this point that they were wrong and repent of their sins and believe which they should have done or to stay or to silence Stephen forever because they just couldn't handle the truth which they couldn't.
And so there it says that they rushed at him. In the Greek this is the same Greek word that was used to describe the mad rush of the herd of pigs. Remember when Jesus cast the demons out into the herd and they rushed off the cliff?
This was the same this is the same word. What it means what this means is that at this point the Sanhedrin's anger boiled over to the point where they could they could no longer stand it.
[21:49] They lost complete control over themselves. So here are these men who occupied the highest court in Israel who were so prideful of themselves and of their appearances and of the fact that they needed or wanted to be honored and now they're reduced to a howling mob.

They're irate. They've literally lost their minds at this point and they're reduced to acting like well like that herd of pigs as they charge after Stephen.
So what's the application here for us? Have you guys been have you guys been paying attention I'm sure you have to the different marches that have been taking place especially in Washington. Did you did you notice that there was a March for Life which was you know against abortion and then I think it was the next day or it was the next week was the the women's march and the crowds and their behavior and the signs that they had and the march for life you had families with their children moms and dads with their kids in strollers and it was peaceful and then with the march for women the signs were you know ones that I'm glad that Jack can't read yet you know because I'd have to be covering his eyes some of the things that they wrote and there's others they're acting they're acting like in a similar way to this crazy mob they're completely those were completely different scenes and so I bring that up because I help I think that helps us better understand the motivation behind this kind of a mob mentality it's a result of being spiritually blind and deaf and so when you see people acting this way it's because spiritually they're blind and deaf and they're acting out on you know their sin nature and they have lost control
Christians are not to return evil with evil but to turn the other cheek man this one's hard just to remind you again Jesus said in Matthew 5 38-39 you have heard that it was said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth but I say to you do not resist the one who is evil but if anyone slaps you on the right cheek turn to him the other also here this pertains only to matters of personal retaliation I think it especially pertains to persecution and surrendering of all personal rights to the Lord when you are facing hostility for being a Christian you turn the other cheek and you endure it and you trust again in God's will and if it is God's will that your life be taken in that way we'll get to that in a minute but what a great way to go right and so when I was thinking about this as well as I'm thinking about Stephen being hit with rocks my thought would be now you know remembering all that I told you this is just don't do this but pick it up and throw it back you know that's my
[25:07] I don't remember I don't know if you guys remember but about 10 years ago Torrey Hunter was a center fielder for the Minnesota Twins and you know in baseball sometimes the pitcher will intentionally hit the batter and he got hit and it was intentional it hit him on the hip and it dropped right at his feet and he picked it up and he threw it back at the pitcher and he hit him in the back and when that happened I was like why hasn't anybody done that sooner you know teach him

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a lesson but he got thrown out of the game and the pitcher didn't but that's that's our that's our reaction you know that's we should retaliate when we're wrong but Stephen didn't rush back at these people and he didn't throw stones back at them and like and likewise Christ didn't come off the cross he could have he could have come off the cross and he could have vaporized all those people but he didn't God has a plan for our suffering and he has a plan for our suffering even in the face of persecution in Jesus death it was to make atonement for sin and propitiate his wrath in Stephen's case it was to spread the gospel to the nations as we'll see there'll be an intense persecution of the church and as a result of that they will be dispersed but they will go out into the nations they will go further the gospel will spread and God had a purpose in all of this and that continues to be the case thirdly

Stephen's death ushered him into eternal life verses 58 through 59 says they cast him out of the city and they stoned him and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul and as they were stoning Stephen he called out Lord Jesus receive my spirit so here we see the apostle Paul make a cameo appearance the mention of a young man named Saul marks a major turning point in salvation history he will become the dominant figure of the book of Acts beginning in chapter 13 and going to the very end of the book his position up front and watching over the garments of those who were stoning Stephen reveals that he was in complete agreement with the proceedings that were happening Stephen's cry echoed that of Jesus if you remember Jesus said father on the cross into your hands I commit my spirit the major difference here is that Stephen is calling out to the Lord and this is again a testimony to the deity of Jesus Christ also this confession indicates Stephen's expectation that he would enter the Lord's presence immediately once he died the Bible does not teach any delay between life here and the believers entrance into heaven the Bible says nothing of purgatory or any kind of state of limbo or being in some kind of unconscious state like soul sleep instead scripture clearly teaches that believers enter Christ's presence immediately following their death you look at the thief who was saved on the cross next to Christ and what did Jesus say today today this day you will be with me in paradise I have had a long conversation with people about this before sometime or another they heard some sermon where they were taught that soul sleep is the case that you enter some kind of state of unconsciousness when you die and the next thing you know you're there at the final judgment and the Bible doesn't teach that when you die as a believer you immediately go to heaven to live is Christ so what's the application for us here to live is Christ and to die is gain that's the application the worst thing that our persecutors could do to us is kill us but in reality that's the best thing that can happen to a believer now again you know
I think about myself and I think I've got a wife with young kids you know I care about Danny and I wouldn't you know that's a great responsibility as well she was gone for the weekend I only had one kid and I went how does she do this all the time or I had the other thought where I was like this is easy and it's like well but I don't do it every day you know it's definitely not easy and so I think about that but then I know if that's God's will for me then God's going to take care of them so again not that you're looking for it but you understand that the worst thing that can happen to you is that you die as a witness for Jesus Christ which means that upon your death you're going to go immediately to be with the Lord and you'll be free from this world you'll be free from the sinful flesh you will be completely free you will enter into the presence and the eternal joy of your master forever that's a great thing fourthly
Stephen loved the people who hated him so how do we respond to persecution like Stephen we love the people who hate us look at verse 60 and falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice Lord do not hold this sin against them and when he said this he fell asleep now I don't want you to misunderstand because you're just like well Pastor Mike you just said that there's no such thing as soul sleep but now he's falling asleep well this is just a term that they used for the way in which he died it was peaceful he slipped from this life into the next the mob poured out their hatred on Stephen and they did so without mercy and what's amazing here is that in contrast to them Stephen while stones are flying at his direction and he's being hit by these things and he's being cut up and beat up by them and he's about to die just as Jesus had done on the cross he pleads that God would forgive his executioners and what does he mean by that
[31:27] I think there he must be praying for their salvation because how else does God forgive he forgives us our sins when we repent of our sins and we are saved right he is praying that his enemies would be saved and so how are we to respond to people who hate us and who persecute

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us well we will respond to them with love is that an easy thing to do no we come across these verses like oh yeah turn the other cheek no problem love your enemies yes I can do that but when it really comes time to do that it's not nearly as easy as we want to pretend like it is but thankfully for us as believers we have the Holy Spirit who gives us the ability to do things like that to love and to pray for people that we would otherwise be tempted to want nothing to do with or to retaliate so the last thing you see there is how does this apply to us well you love your enemy and you pray for those who persecute you not that long ago

I was wearing my KU shirt and I faced some persecution for that and I won't name names but I will say I will say that I was loving you and praying for you despite despite that persecution so anyhow next time we'll move on to chapter 8 and we will see again Saul will ravage the church and we'll again see how God uses persecution like this to cause a greater good and so I hope that you'll be here next week to hear it unless the Lord comes back right that'd be great if he does amen let's let's close in prayer Lord we thank you for the salvation that you have that you have made possible for us through your son Jesus Christ and his willingness to come and to die on the cross for our sins in our place

Lord we thank you for the truth of the resurrection that your son was in fact who he claimed to be that he is the second person of the Trinity and that Lord he fully atoned for the sins of his people and God we thank you for that truth that he is at the right hand and that he's interceding for us right now Lord we thank you for the example that he set for all of us that Stephen mirrored in the way that he was martyred as well that he did not repay hatred with hatred but he loved his enemies even as they were in the process of murdering him and God we understand that right now in our society we have a lot of privileges as Christians in our nation that other Christians don't have and we pray for them just as we pray for ourselves that we would be bold that we would not flee from conflict that we would not run and hide if it means that we might be found to be a Christian and we might face some kind of persecution for that but that we would stand up that we would speak the truth and love and Lord even if that means doing so will cost us our lives that we will gladly give our lives knowing that truly to live is Christ but to die is gain it's so much better

Lord we look forward to that day when we will be with you forever until that day comes Lord I pray that we would all be found to be faithful being your hands and your feet in this world letting people know the truth of the gospel and being unashamed of it and we ask these things in Jesus name amen I'll see you next time.

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