



BIBLE STUDY SERIES

Free Indeed

LESSON 12

The Attack on Liberty

Hebrews 13:3

“Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body.”

Since the first century A.D., Christians have suffered for their faith. Christian liberty has always been a treasured gift. Our liberty in Christ was purchased by His own blood and gives us freedom from the bondage of sin and death. Yet throughout the last two thousand years of history, religious liberty has relentlessly been under attack. Kings, governments, rulers, cultures, and even local communities have worked to silence the gospel and to persecute those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 13:3 reminds us that there are believers in bonds around this world who are suffering every day for the same beliefs in the Word of God that you and I have. The text encourages us not only to “*remember those who are in bonds,*” but also to remember them “*as bound with them.*” We are to place ourselves, as it were, in their position. Think about those in communist countries today who are imprisoned, not for their crimes, but for their belief in Christ. Many believers living within the borders of Islamic countries find themselves persecuted or threatened with injury or even death for proclaiming the gospel. God’s Word reminds us of the great value of our religious liberty but also encourages us to remember those in other lands who do not have the privileges of freedom that we enjoy in the United States.

The Remembrance of the Persecuted

A clear command in Scripture is given to all believers in Hebrews 13:3, “*Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body.*” This scriptural command is often overlooked, especially by those who live in lands that enjoy religious liberty. In the twenty-first century, it is easy to think that everyone around the world has the same religious liberty that those of us who live in the Western Hemisphere often enjoy. However, the past two thousand years of Christian history show us that religious liberty is not the norm, but rather the exception. For most of the history of Christianity, genuine believers have been persecuted,

ridiculed, imprisoned, and often executed, not for violent crimes, but because they believed the truth of the gospel and the sufficiency of the Word of God.

Galatians 6:2 tells us, “*Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*” This further injunction for believers to bear each other’s burdens enables us to see that we do not live independently of other believers around the world. We should pray for them and seek to alleviate their difficult plight. Who will remember the suffering saints in China? Who will pray specifically for the beleaguered Christians in North Korea? Do we think of Sudanese Christians and others in sub-Saharan Africa who are constantly persecuted because they are believers in Christ? Nigeria has seen in the last decade a significant number of churches burned to the ground and Christians abducted and killed by those who hate the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are told that one in five Christians in Africa is persecuted for their faith. According to researchers, two in five Christians in Asia are suffering for their faith in Christ. The deadliest locations for persecuted Christians are in Sudan, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria. Will we follow the command of Scripture to pray for them and to remember them?

The Word of God is clear on this matter. We must not only be very grateful for the freedoms that we enjoy, but we must also understand that others who cannot enjoy the freedoms our country recognizes are suffering this very day. As we meet in comfortable pews with climate control and safety from violence, many of our brothers and sisters in Christ must whisper hymns and hide the few pages of Scripture that they may have. Attending a church service may bring about their arrest or imprisonment.

We are told to pray for them as though we were in bonds with them. Let us obey God in this matter. We must actively take note of those who suffer. We may do this through prayer, through encouragement, through tangible and practical support, and through missionaries and the efforts of our local church.

The Reality of Persecution

John 15:20 states, “...*If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you.*” From the very beginning days of Christianity, believers have been persecuted. Jesus Christ teaches that those who follow Him will be hated as He was hated and will be persecuted as He was persecuted. From the early days of the apostles in the book of Acts, we learn of their persecution. Acts 5:41 records, “*And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.*” Peter and the other apostles not only suffered shame for the name of Jesus Christ, but ultimately died as martyrs for their faith in the Saviour. Only the Apostle John died of old age after being exiled to the Isle of Patmos.

In the first three centuries of Christian history, believers often met in secret, singing softly and praying fervently for safety and for unsaved family members who saw Christianity as a threat to their own way of life. In second-century Rome, Christians were often the first to be accused of crimes or natural disasters. Believers in the Lord Jesus Christ refused to pour out drink offerings and declare that Caesar is Lord. This refusal to acknowledge anyone as Lord, except Jesus Christ, marked out Christian

believers as rebels against the state. In the Roman Colosseum, Christians were commonly used as props for the entertainment of the pagan crowd. Men, women, and children who believed in Christ were often thrown to wild beasts or gored by raging bulls. The reality of the persecution of Christians was a very tangible thing in the first three centuries of Christian history.

Throughout the Middle Ages, many who believed in the truths of Scripture were persecuted by the civil authorities of European nations because they were seen as threats to the governments themselves. Even in England, before the 1700’s, certain Christians, like Baptists, were referred to as non-conformists and were prohibited from being buried in church cemeteries, holding political office, or working as civil servants. Though this persecution did not necessarily take the lives of Bible-believing Christians, British law enforced that the state Church was the only church to which a person could belong and still exercise religious freedom. The old Baptist tinker John Bunyan was in prison for many years for refusing to obtain a preaching license from the Church of England. He penned his famous book, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, while suffering in Bedford jail.

As we can see, religious freedom has been uncommon in the last two thousand years of Christian history. Roger Williams, a Baptist preacher originally from England, came to America and began to welcome those from various faith backgrounds to the new colony he named Rhode Island. For the first time in human history, an official government recognized freedom of religion for all its inhabitants. In the formation of the United States of America, we owe a great deal to our Baptist forefathers, who sought

to emphasize that freedom of religion is never granted to us by some earthly government but is rather an inalienable right given by God to every individual soul. The freedom that we have enjoyed over the last two hundred fifty years is unique in human history.

One of the reasons we are to “*remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them*” is to help us realize that our religious liberty is not guaranteed to the next generation. We must declare and emphasize the importance of religious liberty so that those in future generations will still enjoy the freedom we have in our land today.

The Response to Persecution

Those of us who know freedom of religion and have been set free by Christ should use our liberty to serve others, especially those who are in bonds. Time and time again, Christians throughout the centuries have suffered severe persecution, and yet, have not persecuted others. There is a difference in the way that believers suffer as distinguished from how the world may suffer.

Christ, our Saviour and our perfect example, when He was railed upon, falsely accused, and even scourged, did not retaliate toward those who hated Him. Following His example, Christians have not sought to kill their persecutors when persecuted, but rather to depend upon God’s grace to see them through. Philippians 1:29 tells us, “*For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake.*”

We are not called to retreat in the face of persecution, but rather to stand.

We owe a great debt of gratitude to many faithful Christians in generations past who sacrificed their livelihoods, their homes, and even their lives to pass on to our generation the truth of God’s Word and the testimony of faithfulness to our Saviour. Our Christian response to persecution is not to retaliate in violence, but rather to depend upon God’s grace in times of trial.

The same God who helped believers in the past is the One who gives us liberty today. True liberty may never be taken from a genuine Christian because true liberty is rooted in Christ Himself. Our religious liberty is not just for us to enjoy. We should be very grateful that God has allowed us to live in a country where we may freely gather to worship, sing hymns of praise, and hear the Word of God preached faithfully week by week. Millions of people around the world would love to have the same privilege that we often take for granted. May we remember to pray for those who are in bonds, and may we do our best to encourage those who come behind us to appreciate both our spiritual and our national freedoms.

In Matthew 5:10, the Lord Jesus Christ tells us, *“Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* God sees every tear shed by persecuted believers. In Revelation 2:10, our risen Saviour tells the church of Smyrna, *“...Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”* There is even a special martyr's crown given to those who have been faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ in this life. May we be faithful witnesses and do our part in remembering those who are in bonds. Will you pray for persecuted believers around the world?