

Matthew 22-12-11b

When the Lord Jesus is describing his upcoming work on the cross to his disciples in terms of the breaking of bread, the body which is broken, it has led us to a discussion of, an investigation of, suffering in general, the role that it plays in the atonement, the essential and central role where suffering is inextricably linked with that sacrifice, because it is a point of contact with God and man. We understand the Lord Jesus is the one mediator between God and man, and you could say, well, a disinterested third party is going to mediate, and we'll find someone neutral who doesn't really know the case, and we'll let each side make their points, and this arbitration will be accomplished by this neutral third party. This isn't the nature of the mediation of the Lord Jesus.

The Lord Jesus is fully God. He understands the heart of God the Father as no one but the Holy Spirit does. Having come to earth, incarnate, having lived among us and experienced our weaknesses and our sufferings, our hardships, the cruelty that people can perpetrate on each other, the effects of ever-present sin and evil, the Lord Jesus is also uniquely qualified to represent us to God.

It was not God the Father who died on the cross, nor was it God the Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus Christ, as the God-man, entered into that suffering on our behalf. This gives us confidence.

Without that point of contact, it could easily come to our minds that, well, nobody knows the trouble I've seen. God can't really understand what it's like to walk a mile in my shoes. That objection has been removed, and this is why Hebrews can say, we have a high priest, and he's not so removed that he can't sympathize with our weaknesses.

He was tested. He underwent trial and suffering just as we do, and he negotiated all of that without sin. So Paul is addressing this notion of suffering.

In Philippians chapter 3, we've seen verses 7 through 9, Paul says, all of the things that might be thought worthy of gain, worthy to be attained, worthy to lay hold of in this life, I count them as rubbish so that I can gain Christ. And this is an either-or proposition. To the extent that we hold onto ambitions fueled by materialism, or self-gratification, or getting ahead in the world, the esteem of people, the good opinion, and the realm of accomplishment, and adulation, and material comfort, financial success, and so on, to the extent that we are in the world and of the world in those regards, we can't gain Christ.

Paul says, I've taken all of the things that people consider a gain, and I have labeled them rubbish, and I have tossed them away so that I may gain Christ. I can't gain Christ without doing so. You cannot serve God and mammon.

We can't be both and. This has been a big problem historically for Christianity, especially

in the modern day, is that we pursue a comfortable faith. As long as it doesn't cost me anything, if it benefits me in terms of fellowship, if it benefits me in terms of knowing people, and feeling good, and having a warm, safe place for my kids, I go and get uplifted by the music.

If there's something in it for me, if I come away feeling better off, great. But if it starts costing me something, if it starts to involve suffering or hardship, if I have to endure because of my faith, well, I need to pull back on the faith so that that doesn't happen. I need to hide my connection to Christ.

I need to not speak of my relationship with God in the workplace or in a social setting, because it might cost me someone's opinion. It might actually cost me the esteem of my colleagues or my employer or those appointed over me, and endanger my paycheck. So this doesn't mean to make ourselves an odious Christian.

There's all kinds of ways to do this wrong, but we also cannot hide our light under a bushel when it is supposed to be sitting on the lampstand. Others should see our good works and recognize that it is because of our connection to our Father in heaven that we are so, and that we have a hope. And there is a balance here.

Many, many people have done this wrong, but you can also fail the grace of God, fail to be a witness and a testimony when it counts, because it costs something. We don't want to give up relationships. We don't want to give up possessions.

We don't want to give up opportunities for the sake of Christ. We want to go along to get along. Paul says, whatever was gained to me, I count as loss for the sake of Christ.

He was a Pharisee of the Pharisees. He had a profession. He was a professional religious expert.

He had many opportunities for prosperity and for advancement and for good opinion and for high esteem and to be well thought of. He said, I write those all off as a loss because I have set them aside. I have let go of them so that I can lay hold of Christ.

I consider them rubbish so that I may gain Christ and be found in Him. Not having my own righteousness from the law, from being a Pharisee, from having righteousness attributed to me by others, being well thought of by others, but the righteousness, which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God on the basis of faith. Faith means, this looks like it's taking a bad turn.

I'm going to trust God anyway. So now in verse 10, I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection. You cannot experience resurrection if you don't die.

Seems like a self-evident truth, but think about it. If you want to experience the power of resurrection, the power of divine life infused into us, we have to die first. Something has

to leave so that that life can take its place.

And the old life, the worldly life, the self-gratifying life, the self-sufficient life has to leave. I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings being conformed to Him in His death. And so somehow to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Verse 12, not that I have already obtained all of this, or I have already been made complete, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. We're right back to Proverbs chapter 3. You find it, you gain it, you lay hold of it, and you hang on to it.

I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead. I press on toward the goal to win the prize of God's heavenly calling in Christ Jesus.

And verse 15, but a star by it, all of us who are mature should embrace this point of view. Everything in verse 7 through 14 should be the perspective of a mature believer. If we don't embrace it, if we're not feeling it, if we don't get it, if it doesn't motivate us, if it doesn't settle us, stabilize us, strengthen us, encourage us, we're not mature.

And we need to take steps to grow. Go back to the first principles of the doctrine of Christ. There is coming a time when the entrance into suffering will no longer be required, no longer be needed.

It will have accomplished its purpose like the law of Moses was essential for a time. Then it is superseded. It is set aside in favor of a greater truth.

This will not take place until the kingdom of the father, by the way, the law of Moses will persist in and through the millennial kingdom. So Paul can say in Romans chapter 5, verse 3, we glory in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance. Perseverance produces character and character produces hope.

Perseverance makes us strong. What is character? Normally we don't just talk, you can be a bad character. You can have a lack of character.

Character is a proper structure in the soul. And perseverance builds that character, makes us worthy, makes us trustworthy, makes us consistent, makes us objective, enhances our dedication to God. Perseverance produces character.

Character produces hope. I see what God has built in my soul and I know that He is going to use it in the future. I am going to enter into the resurrection.

I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection. There is going to be something within me that God wants to resurrect, that God wants to unite with Christ and bounce

His glory off of in the eternal future. Hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

There is strength for this task. There is support for endurance and perseverance. So Paul will go on a few chapters later in chapter 8, verse 18, I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

Verse 35 of that chapter, who shall separate us from the love of Christ? And this is a valid question. This is not a rhetorical question. Is there something that is going to separate us from that love of Christ, the love of God that is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit? This love reflects all three members of the Trinity.

God pours it out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. It is the love of Christ. Who shall separate us? What shall separate us from the love of Christ? It is possible to lose our first love.

It is possible to be cut off from Christ, to fall from grace, to be an enemy of the cross as a believer. It's possible. What are the agencies by which that can happen? Romans 8, verse 35, who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, just fear of what could happen, or sword, active, violent persecution.

Are these things going to separate us from the love of Christ? Well, the answer to that question that Paul gives in Romans 8, 36, is in all these, we are more than conquerors. Verse 37, actually, in all these things, we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. We don't just overcome, we enter into a realm that is beyond merely overcoming, because having overcome, becoming an overcomer, enters us into a realm of opportunity, privilege, blessing, and reward.

We're more than conquerors. How? Through Him who loved us. Through Christ, in Him, the fellowship of His sufferings, the power of His resurrection.

That's why Paul can say in verse 38, I am persuaded neither death nor life, angels, principalities, powers, things present or things to come, height, depth, or any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord. This has to be the post we lash ourselves to in the midst of the storm. Nothing can separate us from God's love.

Therefore, I am not going to let truth or mercy forsake me. I'm going to tie them around my neck. I'm going to inscribe them in my heart.

I will not let them depart, and God's love will never depart from me. Paul tells Timothy in 2 Timothy 3.12, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus. Wouldn't it be something if Paul was in a group and he said, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus, raise your hand.

If we were a hand-raising church and I said, everyone listening to the sound of my voice, do you want to live a godly life in Christ? Raise your hand. I think we would all have our hand in the air. Paul says, in fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

I say, wait a minute, I've been here quite a few decades now. I've been a believer since I was a child. I can't really think of a time where I was persecuted.

I know there's people in Africa, there's people in the Middle East, there's people in history that have suffered actual persecution. The Bible tells me through the Apostle Paul that if I want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus, I will be persecuted. And yet, I can't think of any serious examples of persecution.

I've been looked at askance. I've been spoken ill of. Looking at genuine persecution, that stuff just shrinks into insignificance.

So, is this verse not true? Should we be expecting to be haled into prison, or beaten and flogged, or lose our jobs, or be driven out as refugees, or otherwise receive some form of persecution and suffering? Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. Who are the agents of persecution? We're thinking in terms of human opposition, human enemies. But remember, there is also demonic persecution.

There is satanic pressure. The devil roams the earth like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. And of course, he is put for not only himself but his minions.

I doubt that I ever rise to the level of importance that Satan himself would come to see what I'm up to. But there are countless fallen angels. There are demons in the world today.

That's a book by Merrill Unger, published decades ago. Demons in the world today. And everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus is going to experience persecution, if not from the human realm, then from the demonic realm.

Demons are real. It's not a mystical, far-fetched, crazy town idea. There is satanic pressure.

It comes in the form of ideation. It comes in the form of mental pressure, spiritual oppression, the temptation to become depressed and remain depressed, and wallow in depression, and become subjective. This can be fueled by demonic presence, demonic effort.

It's real. And it happens. It is going on in the world today.

When dark thoughts, when anti-God, anti-Christ, anti-biblical thoughts press us, we let it get to us, the words of people, the state of the nation, the world events, what's going on

in social media, the inputs to our soul are negative, negative, negative. There can be demonic pressure behind that. All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

Count on it. Expect it, and be prepared for it. For the second time in as many months, I was tuning a piano in a largely vacant church, and a homeless gentleman came in, looking for something he could carry off.

And I realized that because I am in Beulah land, and living in abundance and peace, and lack of crime, and never think to lock my doors, I realized that my truck outside and out of sight was unlocked. And so, having ensured that this gentleman was taken care of, I went out and locked my truck. And I realized that I need to be prepared for negative consequences when I am circulating out in the world.

There are places where I don't have that worry, but I can't carry that lack of preparedness and lack of vigilance out into a dangerous world, a threatening world, a potentially thieving world. The world can take away our peace, take away our focus on God through Christ, can take away our remembrance of the Word of God. We've got to remember to keep our guard up, to keep our armor on, and to be thinking all the time.

So, if trouble and hardship, persecution and famine, loss, persecution come, and they will, are we prepared? Are we ready with a defense, the shield of faith, to quench the fiery darts of the wicked one, the helmet of salvation, to preserve our thinking and remind us that we are those who wear a helmet that distinguishes us as belonging to the forces of good and not the forces of evil, our feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace, the sword of the Spirit in our hand, which is the Word of God, to defend ourselves from the attacks of the world. In this world, you will have tribulation. Everyone who wants to live a godly life, 2 Timothy 3.12, will be persecuted.

So be ready. Don't be caught off guard. Don't be knocked over.

Matthew 5.10. I've been hearing and reading a lot about the Sermon on the Mount, people's understanding of what it is. Some view it as Jesus' system of kingdom ethics, and that it should be implemented by means of social justice and so on. What did Jesus actually say? Matthew 5.10. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness.

The more we lay hold of righteousness by faith, the more you can expect persecution from the satanic opposition. Sometimes it is spiritual, sometimes it is physical, sometimes it is through people, other times it is through mental pressure. I would say for us in this country, that is the common avenue of attack, because it is so easy.

Why would Satan have to motivate an unbeliever, or an apathetic, and indifferent, and faithless, and wayward, cut-off-from-Christ believer to persecute us, when he can

persecute us over the phone we carry around, or over the computer that we work at, or over the TV that we watch. So much more efficient The means of distribution is already in place. All he has to do is funnel ideas, words, concepts, undermine faith, cause us to question our perspective, mock our attitude, mock our faith, mock our beliefs, deride them, make them seem silly, unscientific, benighted, mystical.

Oh, you and your invisible friend. There is a wearing and there is a tearing that comes from constant exposure to the doctrine of demons that is perpetrated in the world, every second of every minute, of every hour, of every day, of every week, of every month, via technology. Don't need somebody coming in with a sword and a spear to roust you out of your house and take you down to jail.

Take your mind captive. Take your soul prisoner. So easy.

We need to be gatekeepers of what we allow through the eye gate and the ear gate. We need to guard the door of our lips. Input and output.

It's invisible. It is spiritual. Spiritual wickedness in the heavenly places.

We wrestle against principalities and powers, rulers of the darkness of this age. That's the conflict. That's the source of persecution.

We can't let ourselves be tripped. We can't let ourselves be sat on and crushed. Blessed are those, Matthew 5, 10, who are persecuted because of righteousness because theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

How does this work? Does any persecuted person get a chunk of the kingdom of heaven? Jesus does not say, blessed are the oppressed. Blessed are the persecuted, does he? There is a qualifier. So important to look at the conditions.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness. Ah, not all the persecuted qualify for the fulfillment of this promise. Persecuted because of righteousness.

What does this mean? It means that our righteousness has reached a level of visibility that has called down opposition. We are so strong in our faith. We are laying hold of righteousness by faith.

The glory of God is being reflected even as we bear the marks and the death of the Lord Jesus in our body. We are also manifesting his life and this righteousness has skylined us to the opposition. And well, Lazarus can't be walking around here as a testimony to the power of God through Jesus.

Let's kill him. Nobody would have come after Lazarus if he wasn't a walking example of the words and works of the Lord Jesus. But he was targeted for death because he was

raised from the dead.

He bore in his body death and life and he was targeted. Let me read the Gospel of John. So blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness.

I can rejoice in my sufferings. I can rejoice in being the target of persecution when I recognize I am qualified to be a target. I am making enough of a difference in the spiritual conflict that the enemy is coming after me.

Remember in Acts when it says the apostles rejoiced that they had been counted worthy to suffer. They were doing such a good job that the enemy had called them out and they were being imprisoned and beaten and they rejoiced because they knew what it meant. We're doing it right.

We're in the forefront. We're on the battlefield. We're on the front lines.

We're getting shot at. This is great. We're making a difference.

People always want to make a difference. Well, you know, I know we eat, drink and be merry and tomorrow we die. But if I can just make a difference, if I can leave something behind, leave something of a legacy.

I helped people while I was here. This is the altruistic, atheistic, godless view. Well, all you can do is try to do a little good while you're here before you wink out.

They haven't thought very far because when everybody you've done good for winks out, then your good disappears and it is as though you never were. But to make a genuine difference, lay hold of righteousness by faith and be righteous to the point that the enemy marks you out for persecution. Now, you don't rejoice over the suffering itself, but you rejoice because you're looking at it with the proper perspective.

Blessed are those who are persecuted. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven.

This is the way they persecuted the prophets who were before you, specifically the prophets. Why does he mention the prophets? The prophets were visible, visible communicators of the word and the glory of God. And they were persecuted because they were manifesting the truth, because they were speaking the word of God, living the word of God, acting out the word of God.

They were persecuted. Rejoice. You're in that level of company if you're being persecuted for righteousness sake.

Once again, it says when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil. Remember in the age of Israel, in which Jesus is speaking, this is the inception of his

ministry and the physical in the age of Israel is put for the spiritual. The concrete requirements of the law reflect spiritual truth that we still benefit from today.

We don't have to keep the physical requirements of the law. Those have been fulfilled in Christ, but we understand the moral truths, the spiritual value of those things. And as it reflects the heart of the mind of God, we learn from them.

So when it says people insult you, to be persecuted for righteousness in this age, it can be people. It can also be anything else that the forces of darkness mobilize against us. Rejoice and be glad.

Great is your reward in heaven. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

They are property owners in it. It belongs to them. They belong to it.

As we endure these sufferings, as we bear up under persecution, 2 Corinthians 1, 3, praise be to the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those who are in any trouble with that comfort that we received from God. Just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. Same thing Paul talked about in 1 Corinthians, bearing death in the body, we manifest life in the body.

The comfort in our sufferings is something we can share, and it will abound and reflect and transmit to those around us. I think I said 1 Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 4. That's back in 2 Corinthians 1. But this is of a peace in the plan and purpose of God. Back in the days of the nascent nation of Israel, the birth of the nation of Israel, in Deuteronomy 8, verse 3, Moses tells Israel, He humbled you, causing you to hunger, and then feeding you.

God allowed you to hunger, caused you to hunger, put you in a place, leaving Egypt and going to the wilderness, where you would almost inevitably experience hunger, then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known anything about. You didn't see the manna coming. God didn't say, go on out in the wilderness, I'll give you manna from heaven when you get there.

You had to step out on faith. You didn't know where the bread would come from. You didn't know where the sustenance would be found.

He humbled you, causing you to hunger, and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you. This is the purpose. To teach you that man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.

I may not know how I'm going to be provided for. I may not know how I'm going to endure and persist and get to the end of the journey, but I know the word of God. And Deuteronomy 8, verse 3, is what the Lord Jesus quotes to Satan's face when He says, If you're the Son of God, turn these stones to bread.

Jesus said, I live by what proceeds from the mouth of the Father. I may not know where my physical food is going to come from, but one thing I know for sure, it's not going to come from answering your challenge. It's not going to come at your behest, due to your prompting and your idea.

Jesus' hungry body in the wilderness was confronted by Satan. When we are parts of the body of Christ and we are confronted with lack, with loss, with need, one thing we know for sure, the prompting of the world and the prompting of the devil and the prompting of our own fallen nature is not the way to satisfy it. Every word that proceeds from the mouth of God is not the way to satisfy it.

Ecclesiastes chapter 3, we saw this some years back, to everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven, a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to break down and a time to build up, a time to weep, a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, a time to gain and a time to lose, a time to keep and a time to cast away, a time to rend and a time to mend, a time to keep silence and a time to speak, a time to love, a time to hate, a time of war and a time of peace. The seasons change. Whatever time we are currently in, we live in hope because the seasons change.

We want to sink our roots deep as that tree that is planted by the rivers of water, bringing forth his fruit in his season. Finally, Psalm 119 47 through 51. I delight in your commands because I love them.

I reach out for your commands, which I love, that I may meditate on your decrees. Remember your word to your servant for you have given me hope. My comfort in my suffering is this.

Your promise preserves my life. The arrogant mock me unmercifully, but I do not turn from your law. Psalm 119, the beautiful poetic ode to the grace and the beauty and the value of God's Word mentioned in almost every verse of that long, long psalm.

My comfort in my suffering is this. Your promise preserves my life. This is why perseverance leads to hope.

Well, that concludes our view of suffering in the greatest example, the Lord Jesus on his way to the cross, enduring the cross, despising the shame, now seated at the right hand

of God the Father. The season for the suffering of Jesus Christ is past, and we know looking at him that the season of our suffering will also pass. It is our opportunity to make the most of it, and hopefully these passages of Scripture have shined a light on our path so that we can not only aim to do it, but be enabled to do it.

We'll close here with a word of prayer. We will pick up with the further words and works of the Lord Jesus in the upper room next time in Matthew 26, 27 and following. Father, thank you for these wonderful assurances.

The presence and power of your Word in our lives sustains us, as a living and powerful presence, and we pray that as we reflect on what we have looked at together this morning, that not only will we be able to endure and bear up under and develop perseverance, cultivate faith, but we will lay hold of righteousness by faith, and through that righteousness we can shine the light of life and hope through the Lord Christ now and in the ages to come. We pray it in his name. Amen.