

From the Pulpit of the Japanese Baptist Church of North Texas  
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Blessed Are Those Who Are Persecuted

Mathew 5:10-12

5:10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

5:11 "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

5:12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

### **1. Persecution and Faith**

Today, we are going to learn about the 8th blessing of the Beatitudes. As the Bible says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven", this teaches about the blessing of those who are persecuted.

The early church was the church persecution. First, the church was persecuted by the Jewish people, and then, by the Roman Empire. The church that was started in Jerusalem was persecuted and scattered. Apostle Paul was traveling the cities of Roman Empire and preaching, but there was no place that he was not persecuted. Paul talked about his experience of persecution as follows in 2 Corinthians 11:24 , "Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea". Paul's body must have had many scars from persecutions. Paul said in Galatians

6:17, “From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.” “The marks of Jesus” probably refers to his scars.

Jesus told his followers about persecution and wanted to make sure that they were ready for it. The Apostles also told their disciples as follows, “strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” In Acts 14:22. In the days of early churches, having faith meant getting persecuted. But people still came to church, seeking for God, truth, salvation and heaven. They did not aim to receive merits or benefits, nor did they look for the opportunities of self-realization. The baptism means that your old self dies and new self is born. The early believers prepared to die for Christ when they were baptized and expressed their hope to live in heaven.

In Japan, there was also persecution in the era of Kirishitan (means Christian). The first to arrive in Japan and preached was Francisco de Xavier of the Society of Jesus and he landed on the Satsuma (now is Kagoshima) on August 15th, 1549. He preached in Japan for only 2 years but he was the presto for the Japanese Mission. Many missionaries followed Francisco and there were 600, 000 Kirishitans (Christians) in Japan around A.D. 1600 at the War of Sekigahara. The population of Japan back then was only 1.2 million, so there was as much as 5% of Christians in all the Japanese populations.

Nobunaga protected the missionaries but Hideyoshi expelled them. Ieyasu and the Tokugawa dynasty persecuted Christians as much as the Roman Empire did and killed 40, 000 people. But the believers

never gave up and received the sufferings for the Lord Jesus. The sufferings and persecutions made people's faith more pure. In 1597, Hideyoshi captured The 26 Martyrs of Japan in Kyoto and cut their ears and made them walk on the snowy road and killed them in Nagasaki. Among them, there were three boys. The Youngest one of all, whose name was Ludovico Ibaraki, 12 years old, was told by the police officer Hachisaburo Terasawa that if he would abandon Christianity, he would be saved and become a *samurai*. Ludovico replied, "Sir, please become Christian and let's go to *paraiso* (means Heaven in Portuguese) together". There is a monument of The 26 Martyrs on the hill of Nishizaka where they were killed. The relief of the monument shows beautiful Martyrs, including Ludovico, looking up the heaven and praising God. These people surely experienced the Bible verse, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

## **2. Persecution and Blessing**

We have religious ceremonies and customs in Japan, and it is unavoidable to face problems in order to live as a Christian. However, I think it is rare that you are hated because you are a Christian. In the US, being a Christian is very normal and well accepted; therefore, the persecution is very old and foreign thing to them.

However, even in the US, Christians try to live with faith in the distorted era, they might face the problems. Even it is not related to the faith, you might be misunderstood or hated when you say the right thing. You might be treated badly or receive heartless words without any reasons. When you receive injustice or insult, don't get mad and

please remember the words “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake”.

Jesus declared the blessing briefly on other seven. But he added these words to the ones persecuted in the verse 11 and 12. “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” It means that to receive the persecution is to live properly, and it is such an unreasonable. In any eras and any areas, it is always the same that the people who live with devout faithfulness and have mercy relationship with God, receive the persecution. This is an unreasonable. In the 2 Timothy 3:12, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” Therefore Lord added words and encourage the suffering people.

Lord declared the first three blessings, blessing for “the poor in spirit”, “those who mourn”, and “the meek”. We can describe them differently as “people turned to be poor”, “people put into the sadness”, and “people turned to be meek”. “People who receive the persecution” is actually “people who become poor because they are ripped off their property by persecution”, “people who become sad because they lost their loved one”, and “people who become meek because they are humiliated in front of people”. There are three layers of suffering in persecution.

However, at the same time, people who endure persecution for no reason, will be able to receive the four layer blessing. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy”, “Blessed

are the pure in heart, for they will see God”, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God”. True believers look for the righteousness of God in the persecution and receive it. Jesus said on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34 ). He offered love and mercy to the people who persecuted him. God sees the purified heart through the suffering. Even if others flow into rage, they say “This person really believes in God and son of God” when they see the one who filled with peace from God.

The believers are suffering all the time. In such time, you shall pay attention to the Lord’s word “You are the blessed”. Then, you shall overcome the suffering and move forward with blessings from Lord.

### **3. Persecution and Witnessing**

Peter repeated Jesus’ word in his letter, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” which Jesus once told the people on the mount. In 1 Peter 3:14-16, says, “But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.”

Here, Peter mentioned about testifying Jesus Christ. Jesus had commanded us to be “the testifier of Christ” as you know; yet when you’re obedient and loyal to His command, you could be persecuted. However, through persevering that persecution you will become able

to testify Jesus Christ. So Peter taught us not to be afraid of or confused about testifying Jesus, but to “be prepared to make a defense to anyone with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience.”

There were about three thousands Christians in Yonezawa, now called Yamagata Prefecture. Kagekatsu Uesugi, the Feudal lord, protected Christians, but during the era of his son Sadakatsu, the Shogunate prosecuted Christians harsher and harsher and they had to execute his Senior Stateman, Uemon Amakasu and other Christians.

On January 12th, 1629, 53 people were martyred for their faith. The magistrates of Yonezawa execution ground said, “Everyone, they have to die for their faith. Everyone, please bow to them.” And also said, “We know what they have done to us. They took care of lepers, they had mercy on children and elderly, and we truly need them in Yonezawa; however, in this time this country doesn’t allow them to believe in Christ, even though they are the God-like people for us. So please bow to them.”

In Greek, “witness” and “martyr” are put in the same vocabulary. “Martyr” implies the ones who testified Jesus by their own death, but they were actually the “witness” while being alive because of their faith representing Jesus Christ until death. Whether or not you experienced persecution or martyrdom, Lord would like us to testify Him in our daily lives as a result. When you bravely testify Lord, you will experience the blessing He proclaimed for us, well not only experiencing, but also sharing with others in conclusion.

### **(Prayer)**

Dear Father, we thank You for the “Eight Blessings” which Lord Jesus

proclaimed in the Beatitudes. We pray for that these blessings will be in us, and lead us to be walking in the way of faith as you showed. And make us testify your blessings and also sharing with others. Please help us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.