

“LIVING LIFE WITH JESUS”
by Rom A. Pegram (8/25/19)

Today, we’re wrapping up our 40 Day Spiritual Adventure. A little over eight weeks ago, we all made 4 commitments as we began this adventure together—4 commitments in our life with Christ. So, we’ve been trusting God to do some amazing things in our lives during this time, and we promised to give God some things. Here they are: We promised God...

- 1) FIRST PLACE IN OUR DAY—finding a time each day to put God first—a quiet time, if you will (i.e. devotions, Bible reading, prayer, etc.).
- 2) FIRST PLACE IN OUR WEEK—setting aside time each week to worship with God’s people—joining together in this place to see what all God might do.
- 3) FIRST PLACE IN OUR FINANCES—giving on a regular basis—not out of duty, but out of gratitude. And each of you were challenged at the beginning to give \$40 more than what you’d normally give during this 40-Day spiritual adventure.
- 4) FIRST PLACE IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS—intentionally reaching out to others with the love of Christ—both in the church and outside the church.

So, today we’re celebrating all God’s done for us, as we’ve committed ourselves to this relationship during these 40 days. Now, we’re going to switch gears just a bit, as we talk about the final Beatitude and what it means to live as a believer in this world. Let’s start with our scripture for today (Matthew 5:10, NLT):

“God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.”

Today, let’s talk about THE LIFE that’s sometimes misunderstood—knows persecution from time to time—because people go after, many times, what they don’t understand. In my heart of hearts, I believe that’s a part of it—the Christian life is often misunderstood. And *people fear what they don’t understand*, and rather than inquiring, they lash out—in anger. That’s where the persecution comes in. Let me ask you this: *Do you understand, as a Christ follower, what your mission is—the one that attracts persecution?* Jesus said, ‘The world hated me ... and the world’s gonna hate you too.’ But, *why?*

I’m reminded of the story of the man who was at the airport and headed for New York City—first time in the Big Apple. A woman in the airport overheard where he was going, so boldly approached the man and said, “Sir, I heard you’re going to New York City.” And he says, “Well, yes ma’am I am.” And she says, “My son ran away from home about two years ago and I was wondering if while you’re in New York City, would you look for him?” And he said (like many of us would), “Ma’am, New York City is a very large place. I doubt very seriously I’ll be able to find your son.” She just started crying uncontrollably—almost hysterical! So, the guy was embarrassed and finally told her he’d look for her son while in New York. And she said, “Well, you don’t even know his name!” He agreed but took it down. His name was *John Dunn*.

He didn't think much about it until he landed in New York. He was in a cab, going down the street and he happened to look up at the right time and saw a big building with a sign that read 'Dunn & Bradstreet.' And he thought to himself ... this young man has done pretty good for himself ... in two years' time! So, he stopped the cab and went in. He approached the receptionist and all he said was, "Ma'am, do you have a John here?" And she said, "Of course. It's the second door on the right." So he went down the hall, into the second door on the right, and asked the man standing there washing his hands, "Are you Dunn?" And he said, "Yes, I am" and as he was quickly moving out of the way, the man spoke to him and said, "Call your mother!" (Did you follow all that?)

My point, of course, is that *this man seemed terribly confused about his mission*. But, folks, *I think sometimes we're confused about our mission, too!* I don't want us to go away from this 40 Day Spiritual Adventure confused; I want us to know the life Christ has called us to ... and what all that involved. Jesus said (John 14:6), "I am the way, the truth, and the life...." He didn't say 'a way'; he said he was 'the way.' And when you start talking about things that narrowly—exclusively, people get agitated, don't they? It's not really PC today to say that anything is THE truth, but *Jesus said it ... about himself*. And then he said, "Follow me!" Listen to *the whole scripture* for today, would you? You can follow along on the screen (Matthew 5:10-16, NLT)...

"God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. ¹¹ "God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. ¹² Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way. ¹³ "You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless. ¹⁴ "You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father. – Matthew 5:10-16 (NLT)

Isn't that interesting? It doesn't say 'seek to avoid persecution,' does it? *By the way, it also doesn't say to provoke people either!* But what it says is 'don't compromise who you are and what you believe just to get along with everyone.' We should not idolize *being PC* (or anything that comes before Christ)! What Jesus is saying is don't be afraid of persecution, because at some point it'll come your way. And when it does, rejoice and be glad, because he's going to bring some good things out of those bad times...

When I think of persecution, the first example that always comes to mind is ... *the persecuted Paul* (the Apostle Paul). He understood what it meant to be persecuted. I want to look at a second scripture for today—Philippians 4:13, but first let me tell you *who* Paul is writing to and *where* he's writing from...

Paul is writing to a church in a place called Philippi. He'd already been there to share the Gospel before. And while there (Acts 16), he was dragged out of the local meeting place and taken to the town square. They tore off his clothes, beat him, and

threw him into a dungeon. At midnight, he's sitting there in his own blood, naked and cold, not knowing whether he's going to live or die. Well, God delivered him from that place—long story, short...

BUT, *now* he's in another prison—in Rome. And he's writing back to the people there in Philippi, where'd he'd experienced persecution before. He was writing to those who'd come to know Christ, because Paul took a stand and didn't compromise what he believed. And they'd sent him a gift. Paul told them 'thanks' for thinking of him, but then he told them something else. He told them he was O.K. before they sent him the gift; it meant a lot that they sent the gift, but he told them he'd learned how to get along when he didn't have the things he needed ... and when he had too much. 'I know how to get along when I'm hungry,' Paul said, 'and I know how to get along when I'm full,' but thanks for remembering me.' Then he drops this bomb on them (Philippians 4:13, NLT):

“For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.”

That is the secret to being able to endure persecution and come out on the other side of it and be victorious! Now, for the next few moments, I want to unpack Paul's secret. Here he is in prison ... and what's his attitude? What does Paul assure those who've contacted him and care for him deeply? “For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.” Let's look closer at the secret Paul'd learned...

“I CAN” SPEAKS OF UNLIMITED PARTICIPATION. Everyone here needs to leave this place—no matter what you're going through right now—saying, 'I can make a difference in my world!' because many times we decide others can make a difference, but we can't! You know, Paul could have made an excuse, too ... but Paul didn't even see prison as an excuse; he saw it as an opportunity (in Christ)!

I have a lot of heroes in my life, but one of them is a man by the name of Bob Wieland. Bob, several years ago now, set a record at the Boston Marathon—running the longest Boston Marathon ever recorded. For those of you who know a bit about the Boston Marathon, it usually takes 2 ½ to 3 hours—a pretty good run. For Bob, it was 2 days, 4 hours, and 43 seconds. Why? Because ... Bob has no legs. When he got ready to run the Boston Marathon, he made himself about a 15 lb. saddle and strapped it to the torso of his body. Then he made two leather gloves—like boxing gloves. And what he did for 2 days, 4 hours, and 43 seconds is ... he threw his arms out, lifted up his torso in that 15 lb. contraption, and swung it forward and it hit the pavement and then his arms and then his torso. And he did that for 2 days, 4 hours, and 43 seconds. And when he finally hit the finish line, this is what he said: “...I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.” When Bob was a young man, he was told he couldn't be an athlete, but he didn't listen to those voices. He listened to another voice—the one that gave him strength in all things...

Are you making excuses right now? Are you figuring you can't make a difference because of some deficiency in your life? Paul said: “I CAN....” And he did, with Christ's help. *Unlimited participation* with Jesus involved—the first part of Paul's secret to dealing with persecution in this life! When you come to realize God is in control, God

made you perfectly and wants to work through you, then you can say like Paul: “I CAN!” Here’s the second part: Paul says, “I can ... do everything/all things....”

“DO EVERYTHING/ALL THINGS” SPEAKS OF UNLIMITED PRODUCTION.

Production, in the Bible, is called producing/bearing ... FRUIT. So, what do we mean by ‘FRUIT’ in a biblical sense? Look at John 15 (1-2, 5) with me, where Jesus says...

¹ “I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn’t produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. ... ⁵ Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.”

So, we can see two things going on here regarding ‘fruit’... Fruit is the character of Christ. We’re talking about spiritual *reproduction*; how has faith been passed along, or reproduced, because of your life? It’s not only having the character of Christ, but passing that along to others; there’s the reproduction; Christ is there in an unlimited way when we undertake this task—living our lives in such a way that people notice. Galatians 5:22-23 gives us a list of the ‘fruit of the Spirit’; if you were in E.T. Class, you already know this—these are the fruits Christ wants to reproduce in you, then in others... Fruit is also spiritual production. This is simply other’s coming to know Christ; how have we been in partnering with Jesus on this—winning others to a faith in Christ?

One of my favorite stories is about a guy in the city who rode the public train one day. He was standing there on the platform and about the time he got ready to board the train to go to work, he noticed a single mom there and she had a lot of packages and a little preschooler at her side. And somehow, somebody ran into that little preschooler, who was holding a puzzle box full of puzzle pieces, and the box and the pieces ended up flying up in the air and all over that platform. And here the mom is with her arms full of packages...

The man waiting for the train had a decision to make—either get on the train to go to work or help this lady and her child. He laid down his briefcase and he got down on his hands and knees and he pulled all those puzzle pieces together. The little kid was crying, so the guy put the pieces back in his box, then put the lid on and made sure the kid was O.K. And then he sees his train out of the corner of his eye taking off. He was trying to figure out how he was going to catch the next train and not be too late for work ... when he gets a tug on his pants. The little boy is looking up at him and he asked the man, “Are you Jesus?”

Let me ask you something: *When was the last time someone asked you that question? Maybe not in those words, but when was the last time you did something so unexpected for someone and so Godly that just for a moment someone saw Christ in you? Because of the strength Christ gave Paul, while in prison, I believe the guards and others saw Christ in Paul. But every time Paul was in prison, God did not throw the prison doors open, but Paul knew He could! And it changed the way Paul looked at life, and treated others—always. Maybe today, we need to ask God to change our outlook, so that when*

persecution comes, we're still on his side—knowing He's on ours... Let me finish this last scripture: I can ... do everything ... *through him/Christ!*

“THROUGH HIM/CHRIST” SPEAKS OF THE UNLIMITED PERSON. ‘Through him’ ... *who gives me strength!* This is the final part of Paul’s secret to dealing with persecution ... and let me give it to you in a nutshell; we are speaking of the ‘unlimited person’ here—unlimited access to Christ, but here’s how it works:

In order to be strengthened (for life, persecution), we need to be both *connected* ... and *corrected!* But here’re the facts. 95% of people in America believe in God; they even say they talk to God. My reaction to that is ... there’s a difference between being married to someone and dating them. And it’s kind of like that with God, too. What’s the difference between dating and marriage? COMMITMENT. But knowing casually about God and being committed to God are two different things. I’ve asked people before if they’re Christian. And I usually get answers like, ‘Well, I used to go to church.’ Or sometimes, ‘I was at camp a long time ago and I remember sitting around the campfire and I got this funny feeling, so maybe I’m a Christian.’ Folks, that’s like a guy saying, ‘I once saw a girl and I got this funny feeling, so maybe I’m married.’ Are you with me? We have to be connected to Christ through a COMMITMENT, or there’s no relationship that’s eternally binding; don’t ever take that one for granted. If we want to experience the power Paul talks about here, in the midst of persecution especially, we have to be *connected!* And then sometimes (usually)...

We must be corrected. ‘Three reasons for pruning: 1) God does surgery when we’re headed in the wrong direction—to correct that. 2) When we have disease in our life—anything that would corrupt us and cause us to fall out of favor with God, God cuts it out. And 3) God cuts out the ‘sucker branches’ sometimes to make us healthier—to bear more fruit! *Connected* and *corrected*, if we want the strength that comes from the unlimited person of Christ—*through Christ who gives me strength...*

One thing I’ve learned in life: When God begins to allow persecution into our lives and make demands on us, sometimes we get just a little possessive about things... There was a lady who took her car into a repair shop, found out she was stuck there all day for repairs, and wasn’t going anywhere. It was a dirty shop, magazines about 10-11 years old, and a vending machine. That was it. She hadn’t had anything to eat all day, but there were cookies in the machine. So she got herself some cookies, didn’t really feel like talking to anyone, but the only seat left was at a table with an old man, so she sat down at that table. It wasn’t long until that man reached over and helped himself to a cookie. She overlooked it, ate a cookie herself, and went for a second cookie. When she did, the old guy reached over and took that second cookie. And if looks could kill, that man’d be dead! Grinning real big, he held that second cookie, broke it in half, and gave her back half a cookie. She was so mad that she got up from the table and stormed off. It was only then she looked down in her purse and noticed ... *her* cookies were still there.

When God allows tough things to come into our lives, when God allows us to be in uncomfortable situations, a lot of times we think God is messing with our cookies! But think about the last breath you just took; wasn’t that air a gift from God, too? Folks, let’s

have the attitude of Paul, please? Let's rejoice, wherever we're at in life, and let's be exceedingly glad because God has a plan ... and his plan includes you! Let's thank God for that...