

Enemies of Mission: Fear within

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[0 : 00] The second of our studies on this chapter under the title, Mission That Claims Everything. And today, looking at verses 16 to 33, the subject is this, enemies of mission.

And in particular, that great enemy, fear. Fears within. Last time we saw that in verses 1 to 15, Jesus gives his kingly briefing for mission.

To his ambassadors, those who are going to carry his mission to the world. And we noted very carefully in verse 1 that his words were not direct words to us.

They were to the twelve apostles. Uniquely to them for their specific mission, carrying on the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, although these words are not written directly to us, they are all for us.

The principles span the ages, and so there was much for us to learn about the plan and the progress of God's mission to the world. About the proclamation and the power of that mission.

[1 : 07] About the priorities for it, and God's provision for us. And about the people and the partnerships also in that mission. All of these things we saw were directed and dictated by the gospel itself and its message.

But now in verse 16 and following, it's very clear that Jesus is looking beyond the immediate concerns of his twelve disciples and that particular mission. He's stretching out and beginning to think of the time after Pentecost, when these same apostles and others would bring Christ's gospel to the world.

Verse 18, for example, particularly mentions the mission to the Gentiles. Whereas remember verse 6 last week, the apostles were told then to go simply only to the Jews.

So clearly this is later. And if we look at verses 21 and 22, it does seem as though he's looking further still, indicating perhaps the whole of the church's mission to the world, stretching to today. The things he describes there, the turmoil, the parents against children, the division, the hatred. These are all things that Jesus is telling us will be the case.

[2 : 19] The overwhelming emphasis in Jesus' teaching on mission is pointing us up to the fact that we must expect persecution.

And that in the light of that, we have to be ready to persevere. Look at verse 16. It's an abiding principle that Jesus is speaking there.

I'm sending you out as sheep among wolves. So be warned, verse 17, you must beware of men.

They will do all kinds of things to you because they hate you for my name's sake.

And that's very stark, isn't it? He says that you have to endure to the end of all of that kind of thing to be saved.

I don't think enduring to the end here means enduring to the end of the world. Obviously, not all are going to live till the end of the world. But it does mean enduring to the end of the persecutions. It does mean enduring to the end of our life as good soldiers of Jesus Christ.

[3 : 22] Like, fighting the good fight, finishing the race to receive the crown. Incidentally, verse 23 there, where he talks about not having gone through all the towns of Israel until the Son of Man comes.

I don't think that refers to the second coming of the Lord Jesus. It does seem in the context there that Jesus is referring again to the Apostle's particular mission then. That phrase, the Son of Man coming, remember, is picked up from Daniel chapter 7.

And in Daniel chapter 7, it's the Son of Man rising to the throne of God. It's really a picture of the authority of the kingdom of God being given to his Son. Not necessarily his coming again.

Jesus, later on in Matthew 26, verse 64, do you remember when he's at his trial, he says to

Caiaphas, the high priest, from now on, you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the

power and coming in the clouds.

He's clearly there referring to the death and the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus. But whatever we make of that, we simply can't miss the obvious emphasis of Jesus' words here about persecution and perseverance, about endurance in the middle of much hardship in the Christian life and the Christian witness.

[4 : 39] What he's saying is this, danger, heartbreak, opportunities, but disappointments, struggle. That is Christian discipleship.

That is gospel mission. Isn't that a great contrast to what we often hear about today and the talk we hear today about mission and discipleship?

The kind of words that we hear bandied about today most of the time are words like celebration, words like experience, words like worship. I went on the website of a prominent Christian bookshop just to have a look today and on the front page of the website, these were all the words that were highlighted in bold.

I didn't see any words saying persecution, suffering, hardship, hatred. But you see, there's no such triumphalism as Jesus. There's no naivety either. He says, beware of people.

They're like wolves. It's pretty blunt, isn't it? And he says, you must have, therefore, wisdom and realism. You must be wise as serpents.

[5 : 47] Prudent. Clear. Not naive about the Christian life and Christian witness. It's going to be tough. It's going to be tough right to the very end.

And you mustn't be surprised by that. You must be ready to endure. But why is it going to be so tough, you ask? Why should that be? Well, the answer is very clear all the way through the Gospels and the New Testament.

It's simply this, that the Gospel of Jesus Christ always divides. It always divides. Remember back in chapter 9, verse 33, at the end of all these marvelous miracles that Jesus did.

On the one hand, the clouds are marveling. We've never seen anything like this. Rejoicing in faith.

The very next verse, But the Pharisee said he casts out demons by the prince of demons.

You see, faith and unbelief. The Gospel of Jesus always divides. And the messengers of Jesus, therefore, also always divide. Verse 34, he says very clearly, Don't think I've come to bring peace, but a sword.

[6 : 55] A sword of division. Do you remember in chapter 7, when we had those stark words about the two ways? There are two ways, says Jesus. Only two ways. Life and death.

You see, the Gospel is always a double-edged sword. It divides men and women. And that's why it's hard to be a Christian. In fact, the mark of a false Gospel and false Gospel preaching is that there's no division.

The whole church acclaim, Oh, isn't this wonderful? This is great. This is the ministry that we love. Whenever a message is uniformly popular, friends, that means it's not likely to be the Biblical Gospel.

If the reaction to Gospel ministry is not the same as the ministry reaction that Jesus received, it's not his message. Some, on the one hand, will be hungry and will always desire more.

But others, well, there will always be those whose ears are closed, or are closing, whose hearts are hard or hardening. We have to come to terms with that in our Christian life and in our Christian witness.

[8 : 06] And it's not easy. I'll tell you, from the point of view of a preacher, it's not easy at all. It's very, very hard to know that if you're being faithful to the message of Jesus, you'll see division. No matter how good your church is or how faithful it is.

And you will find that in your Gospel mission. But Jesus tells it as it is. He's real. He's not a spin doctor. He says we must expect hardship and persecution.

We must expect struggle. And we must prepare for it so that we are able to persevere to the end. You see, he tells us that we go out as sheep.

In other words, in the world's eyes, we are powerless. We are foolish. We are weak. Who heard of putting out sheep to convert wolves? It's ridiculous in the world's eyes.

But we're not valueless, you see, because Jesus is saying, you're going out like sacrificial lambs for my sake. For my sake. That's why you're hated. And you have heavenly power and you have heavenly resources that the world doesn't see.

[9 : 14] Just look at verse 19. He says, don't be anxious when you're held up in front of courts and after flogging is because you'll have the words because God will give you the words. Because I'm with you.

Because I will never abandon you. And you must know that as well. Notice the realism with which Jesus flags up three areas, particularly where persecution and hardship come from.

Verse 17. First of all, the religious establishment, the synagogues. You see, the official church of that day, the synagogues, persecuted because it was so adrift from the reality of the truth of the gospel of the grace of God now fulfilled in Jesus Christ that it couldn't stand it.

And so it would flog the ministers of Jesus Christ. And nothing has changed over 2,000 years. That's just the case today. Around the world, so much of the persecution of true believing Christians comes from institutional churches.

Just ask Christians in some of the former Iron Curtain countries where the Orthodox Church in Russia and in Greece too persecutes relentlessly evangelical believers.

[10 : 29] It's just the same in our own country, although it's not quite as physical. The same sneering from the institutional church. It despises evangelical faith.

It despises the words of Jesus and his apostles being taken seriously. Save us from these fundamentalists. That's what the cry is. Let our church be broad instead as long as it's narrow enough to keep that out and keep them out.

That's the reality, isn't it? Because religion hates real faith. Always has done, always will do. Because real faith liberates people.

That's why. Whereas religion seeks to control and enslave people. And establishment ecclesiastics love love to make people dependent on them.

Love to make them enslaved to them. Love to make the institution the one that's in control. So there'll be persecution always from the institutional church.

[11 : 29] There'll be persecution verse 18 from the society and from the state from governors from kings from society at large. And that's true because throughout history the Christian faith where it's been real and alive has always been a terrible threat to society.

A society that's militantly anti-Christ. That's why Nero persecuted the Christians and blamed the burning of Rome on them. Butchered them. That's why the Nazis and the Soviets rounded them up and sent them to gulags and concentration camps.

But in our modern western secular democracy there's just the same principle at work. There may not be the physical violence yet but there's just the same vehemence.

Think of our media how sneering and how scornful they are of any true biblical faith. They laugh and to scorn on our TV and our radios.

The disdain of John Humphreys or Jim Nocte or Jeremy Paxman. Oh they'll suck up like anything to the liberal churchmen who'll tell them everything they want to hear. But when somebody actually is clear and stating the teaching of Jesus and his apostles there's nothing but scorn.

[12 : 46] There'll be persecution also Jesus says verse 21 from within the family. Maybe that's the most painful of all isn't it? Think of the hurt the hostility the bitterness the pain that there is so often in Christian people's families when a child maybe is converted turns to Christ and their parents cannot stand the loss to their career and to their future and to everything else that it seems to indicate.

Or when a child maybe turns against the faith of their parents what a heartbreak what a pain that is or a husband against the wife but Jesus is saying this is genuine Christian discipleship this is what will happen this is not an evidence of failure this is just the reality of following Jesus.

Indeed in verse 22 he sums it up by saying all will hate you for my name's sake. And sometimes that experience is very real isn't it?

We know that. Sometimes it's a very lonely thing to bear the name of the Lord Jesus today.

Sometimes it seems almost too much to bear but Jesus is warning us and saying don't be deceived. It's not a sign of failure. My mission is not out of control when these things happen. Rather friends it's the only way it can be in a world which disdains our Saviour.

[14 : 19] Rejoice he says it's all for my sake it can't be any other way. Remember the Beatitudes? Blessed are you when others revile and persecute and slander you on my account.

Rejoice why? Because so they persecuted the prophets who went before you. In other words you are the genuine article of faith when people hate you. and great is your reward in heaven.

In other words you are not forgotten when these things are happening to you. God has not abandoned you. He's preparing a reward. He sees it all. And you've got to realise he says this is how mission works.

Look at verse 18 everything you endure for my sake he says will be for witness to the Gentiles. The word there is martyrion it's where we get our word martyr. That's how the church grows Jesus says. Tertullian the second century saint was right when he said the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Just read the Acts of the Apostles it was every time moments of persecution that led to the great spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[15 : 30] These are hard things for us to grasp and to bear but Jesus tells all this to his disciples so that they will not be unprepared for lives of discipleship and so that they will be able to endure.

And again it's the opposite isn't it of so much that we hear today. Don't tell people the negatives of the gospel up front that'll put them off. Just tell them the positives. We don't want to tell people about sin and wrath and hell and things like that to begin with or scare people away.

let's give them the nice part. Well not only is that deceitful and dishonest it's the absolute opposite of the pattern Jesus gives us plainly.

See Jesus knows the human heart. He knows that all these things that can happen to us are great weapons in the hands of a great enemy of all people and a great enemy of Christians in particular the enemy of fear.

Fear is the great enemy of mission and it can neutralize mission in churches in the individual lives of Christians even in Christian families.

[16 : 40] Fear can be such a great enemy within us gripping us and paralyzing us. And so it's got to be confronted to be overcome. And we confront it by facing up to the causes of fear.

And often they're very real and they're unavoidable but you see Jesus then shows us why if we allow our thinking to be directed and shaped by the realities of a true gospel perspective why we need not fear and how we can endure and how we can advance the kingdom of God in Christ.

And in verses 26 to verses 33 he puts his finger on three specific and very powerful dangers that our great enemy fear uses to cripple us.

Three times he gives reasons for us to be afraid but three times he says fear not. And each time he gives us the offensive remedy the answer to fear from the perspective that enables us not to fear.

First of all do you see in verse 24 he brings up before us the terrible sting of slander and slander you see so easily leads to a silencing of the witness of the gospel.

[18 : 03] Look at verse 25 shows us just how horrible that sting can sometimes be. Here's the religious establishment here's the church of the day with all its authority branding Jesus the son of God the Messiah himself branding him as Beelzebub the prince of demons the devil himself.

Here's powerful and clever intellectual religious experts you know the kind that come on the television programs and the documentaries in dog collars with their PhDs and here they are sneering at these gullible simpletons who take the Bible literally who believe things like heaven and hell or only two ways or final judgment or the exclusive way to God through only one Jesus Christ oh dear yes yes I used to be like that of course but then I grew out of it don't get me wrong I'm very glad of my evangelical past when I was young but one has to move on one does wring one's hands at these poor simple folk these simplistic folk who take the Bible so seriously really they're quite a danger they're quite fanatical we certainly mustn't let them get control of the training for ministry in our church no you see how do you feel how do you feel when that kind of slander is directed at you and what you believe and you trust and cherish deep in your heart what you want to do isn't it it shrivel up into a ball and hide and get away from that horrible stinging sarcasm it's so easy for the sting of slander to silence us to silence the gospel to silence the truth and the assault on us comes you see from all of these three directions that Jesus has already spoken about it comes from the religious establishment oh fundamentalists that swear word that is thrown at those who are not at all what the word really means taking the Bible in a wooden and utterly literalistic way but it's thrown at those who take the Bible seriously who take it seriously as God's word who listens to

Jesus' words and listens to the words of his apostles in the New Testament and we're called fundamentalists and there's a great temptation to keep quiet and get the head down especially if we're wanting recognition especially if we feel a need for acceptance I'll tell you it's very hard for ministers in a church like ours to be faithful in the face of that kind of slander I hope you pray for us I hope you pray for many others who are in places much harder than here it's often a very very lonely furrow when everybody else in your presbytery looks at you as the idiotic simpleton fundamentalist

comes from family circles you know it yourself young teenager becomes converted begins to take God seriously they and their family are desperately worried about this level of fanaticism that's taken over them you've got your parents worried sick there's a real temptation to keep quiet it comes from all around society in our work in our schools in our colleges the sneers behind your back when you won't join in the humour of the office or the laboratory or the classroom when you won't take part in the endless lewd talk or the going on and on and on about sex or whatever it is do you know

I heard about a young teenager this week who had his work had his mobile phone stolen by his colleagues and one message that they found on it was a message sent by a Christian friend the words of a psalm the verse of a psalm to encourage him and they taunted him relentlessly and remorselessly what do you think that does to somebody in a hostile work environment I'll tell you what it does makes them want to be silent about their faith makes them want to be quiet completely and make that horrible slanderous thing go away and that pressure is very very strong but Jesus says in verse 26 have no fear of them and he gives a reason nothing is covered he says that will not be revealed nothing is hidden that will not be made known in other words as Hebrews 4 verse 13 says nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight everything is covered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account

God is true you see and in time the truth will out that's what Jesus is saying there is a coming judgment when everything will be laid bare exactly as it really is and he will vindicate his people you can be sure of that and so verse 27 you see the answer to slander is not silence but proclamation truth proclaim the truth of God from the housetops Jesus says don't be silenced God is true never forget it proclaim his truth you see the gospel proclaims hidden things things which are invisible to the eyes of this world but the day will come when all these things will be declared openly and all the world will see it and Jesus says to his embattled children his embattled believers his disciples live in the light of that day keep that day and all that will be laid bare on that day uppermost in your mind and proclaim the truth of God do not be afraid of them secondly our enemy fear beats us with the dread of violence and persecution verse 28 and these things can so easily lead to paralysis and compromise can't they verse 28 speaks of the reality of violence and martyrdom and that is not just something that affected the first century it's affected every century of the church and I'm told that in the 20th century there were more

[24 : 41] Christian martyrs than in all the previous 19 put together and very likely this century will have even more just read the literature I hope you do from the Barnabas Fund or from Christian Solidarity or Release International it's full of the stories of people being relentlessly persecuted with violence for the sake of Christ again it comes from the religious establishment in many places it comes from families even in our own country a friend of mine in London who's involved in outreach amongst Muslims has told me about many of their Muslim converts who have been physically abused beaten some have disappeared altogether assumed dead by their families when they followed Christ it comes too from society and secular governments in many parts of the world just look at Burma the systematic persecution of the Karen people a largely

Christian people and many many more but in our western secular democracies the hostility again is just as great there's no violence because it's against the law at the moment nevertheless we're seeing the laws changing aren't we you can be quite sure that this law that's wanting to be passed against incitement to religious hatred will be a law that is turned against the Christian church of course if we teach the clear teaching of scripture about the uniqueness of Christ and therefore the falsity of all other ways to God if we teach the truth of God's moral law about sexuality and other things these things will be turned against us the legislation governing charities is all changing it's just a matter of time before the Christian church begins to lose privileges of that kind of course Jesus says expect that expect it and be ready for it and worse but verse 28 do not be afraid don't be afraid even of those who have the power to kill the body rather fear

God God is not only true he is great he is the one who has the power of life for death now and that power for eternity and that fear as Proverbs 9-10 says is the beginning of wisdom as Psalm 34 says fear the Lord all you his saints for those who fear him have no lack that was the psalm that we sang earlier the version of the hymn fear him you saints and you will have nothing else to fear God has you in his hands even now but more importantly more importantly as verse 33 makes absolutely plain whoever denies me before men I will deny before my father who is in heaven we will all be in his hands ultimately on that day God is the one to be feared not the one who can beat and kill our

bodies live in the light of that day

Jesus says thirdly fear taunts us with the desolation of divine distance when God seems to be so far away it seems that he's abandoned us and so easily that can lead us to a total loss of confidence a loss of trust isn't that right perhaps that's the most difficult thing of all perhaps that claims more casualties than any other when life is hard when our prayers don't seem to be answered when it seems like the heaven is as brass and God is dead where are you Lord why am I still suffering even though I've been faithful haven't you prayed that why have you allowed my beloved partner to be taken away from me where are you Lord why haven't I been healed of this illness that dogs me why have I got no sense of any breakthrough in my ministry in my witness to the people that I long to see come to Christ why where are you

Lord have you gone away are you distant and you see the in religious establishment and the world and our families join in the chorus look at these pathetic bible people they say oh they're so passe so feeble they don't see anything like the church growth that we see it's what you get from the new exciting dance beat laser light churches full of excited young people oh God's moved on you see he's left that kind of thing that old that word ministry no we're in a visual age a techno age that's the kind of Christianity we've got you've been left behind that's why you're seeing all that God's distant or says your family look what you could have had if you haven't been so fanatical and out of your mind leaving that good job of yours leaving all those good prospects for this ridiculous thing wanting to train to teach people the gospel or go abroad or be a minister what has your God provided for you where is he or says the world look what you could have had as your

[30 : 15] CV is quietly passed over for all the jobs you apply for because the things that you've done are worthless in the world's eyes they don't care that you've gone abroad to teach people the gospel they don't care that you've taken time out of your career to train or teaching others the message of salvation where is your God when again and again you can't get the job when there's those hidden snubs or the quiet barbs or the scorns of the world where is your God and we say to ourselves Lord have you left us nothing new to that the psalmist in Psalm 42 my tears have been my food day and night while they continually say where is your God and the answer says Jesus is not only that God is true and he's to be proclaimed not only that he's great and to be feared but far from being distant and disinterested in you he is near and he's to be trusted verses 29 and 30 are wonderful aren't they it's not just that he sees each sparrow that falls to the ground it cannot happen without the

God of heaven and earth deciding that it will happen two hapenny sparrows and he numbers the very hairs of your head isn't that extraordinary picture of a mother sitting with a little girl between her knees gently combing and pleating her hair and that's the Lord except he's counting them too every single one he's near he's near you and he loves and he cares for every single one of his beloved children and every single hair on their head isn't that extraordinary and therefore he says in verse 31 fear not why because you are more value than many sparrows I love those words that God speaks to Moses at the burning bush about Israel and Egypt and Israel that is downtrodden to think God's abandoned them they're groaning in slavery and all the time they're unaware that God is through them working out his great plan of redemption and God says I have seen

I have seen the affliction of my people and have heard their groaning and I am come down to save them to deliver them and maybe you're feeling this morning a little bit like that as though God is distant as though no interest in you personally and perhaps you feel well why should he I'm so insignificant and perhaps even more you're saying I've let him down so badly this last week that he must have left me and your confidence is sapping and your faith is teetering and that enemy of fear has gripped inside your heart and verse 31 is especially for you today fear not you are of more value than many sparrows how do I know that

I know that because Christ the Redeemer came down from the glory of heaven to die on the cross at Calvary because he saw the affliction of his people and he loved his people and so he came and do you think that he will ever abandon you in your Christian life having done that never he says to his people I am with you even to the end of the age even amid all the struggles that you surely will face right to the end I am with you I am not distant take heart he says if they did that to you it is because they have done it to me if they hate you it is because they hate me if they persecute you it is because they persecuted me but rejoice it is enough for a servant to be like his master for a disciple to be like his teacher it is all for me he says it is for my name's sake it is not because

I have abandoned you my father always used a quote from one of the Puritans this he who stands closest to his captain is a sure target for the archers so friends if you're struggling this week Jesus says take heart live life now in the light of that coming day that day when all shall be declared when God will vindicate his people and rejoice verse 32 look at that verse everyone who acknowledges me I will acknowledge before my father in heaven yes count the cost of the struggles and the hardships that there will be in the Christian life do not be naive do not mistake but count the cost properly count it in the terms of eternity the only terms that matter every struggling Christian believer who is faithful to the name of Jesus

[35 : 44] Christ in the onslaughts and the assaults from the world the flesh and the devil in all its forms every single Christian believer who endures through that will hear the Lord Jesus Christ proclaiming their name to the father in heaven and also remember verse 33 count the cost of not standing for Jesus Christ to deny him who loved us and did everything for us leads only to a loss that is absolutely unimaginable the mission of Jesus and his kingdom claims everything be clear about that discipleship is and will always be a life of struggle and persecution it will be a life of being a sheep among wolves it is a life of persevering to the end despite fears within be clear but says Jesus don't be silenced by this thing of slander God is true proclaim his truth to the housetops and fear not don't be paralysed by the dread of violence God is great fear him not men and women and all that they can do to you and don't ever ever be desolate thinking God is distant and has forgotten you God is near every hair on your head is numbered trust him he loves you he sees it all he cares he's with you and above all live now in the light not of these light and momentary troubles but in the light of the eternal glory that far outweighs them all live life in the light of that day and everything that we face today will only be a cause for rejoicing even though our joy at times will be through tears and pain it will be a solid joy and the lasting treasure that only the disciples the children of Jesus

Christ know anything about well let's pray heavenly father we thank you that you are straight and true and real with us we thank you that you hide nothing from us about the reality of what it means to be your people but we thank you most of all that you open our eyes to the greatest reality the unseen reality of a world and the kingdom that has begun in the Lord Jesus Christ and which in him shall endure forever so help us we pray to see with your eyes to have a perspective of eternity that in this week ahead with all that it may bring for us we will by enduring faithfully as soldiers of Jesus Christ at the last be counted among those rejoicing in your name and in your glory for we ask it in your name

Amen well let's sing a hymn to encourage us as we close number eight