

The Beatitudes – Part 2

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Matthew

By Dr. Jeff Meyers

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Crossroads Ministries
301 S. 8th Street
Opelika, Alabama 36801

Website: www.fbcopelika.com
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/jeffmeyers

What a wonderful reminder tonight, the hymn of heaven. You know, the last week of my life has been a wonderful reminder of the truth behind that song. Over the course of the last week and a half, I've had the privilege of preaching and teaching with the use of translators in three very distinct languages, the language of what we know as French and Creole and Spanish. Some has been outside of our community, some is within our community and isn't it good to know that no matter what our native tongue, no matter what our "background," that the same message is true for all people in all lands, in all places, and in all times.

So tonight, as we gather before I pray, my voice is not as strong as I wish it was. Any of you who've ever been in any type of mission, endeavor, understand the toll that it takes on your body. But I will say this, there's a statement that I learned this last week and I'm sure one day I may be proven otherwise, but until this point, there's no hot like Haiti hot. I just want you to know. And one of the privileges of going on a mission trip or mission endeavor is the Lord is controlling, we are not, and usually the plans that we have get either shrunk, expanded, changed, altered, twisted and it's just kind of how the Lord saw fit. I was under the impression that I was going to be preaching or teaching three distinct times while we were there. The Lord multiplied that and three turned into six, and then when I would show up to preach, the times were a little bit different. There was one distinct time where I showed, they told me originally I would be speaking on a subject matter for an hour. When I got there, the subject matter was changed, and they said we need you for four hours. And so that being said, I apologize for the weakness of my voice, but again, how good it is to be not only to serve the Lord, but to be used by the Lord, and to see that the same Jesus and the same gospel is just as powerful everywhere we go to, every people in all lands. Just a wonderful, wonderful reminder.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, tonight as we come to your word, Lord, we confess and we admit that you are God and we are not. Lord, may our desire tonight not be to shape or mold you into our image or to conform you to our perspective or our philosophy but, God, tonight would you just take your word and would you speak directly to our hearts and directly to our minds? Lord, may you shape us. May you mold us. May we as Romans 12 says, not

be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of our mind. Tonight, Lord, may your word renew our mind. May it shape our soul. May Lord, may it shape and form us into your image, so that we might be your sons and your daughters as you see fit. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Tonight, I want to encourage you to turn in your Bibles to Matthew 5. You may be new to us on Sunday evenings either here in person or by way of online, but we are very slowly and strategically walking through the book of Matthew with a purpose that is larger than just the 28 chapters therein. I am convinced that the gospel of Matthew is not just "one of the four gospels," but it is strategically placed to help us see this transition from the old covenant to the new, from the worship of the temple to our bodies being the temple of the Holy Spirit. We have within the book of Matthew just numerous accounts of reaching back into the Old Testament and it says, "As it is written or as it has been written." The book of Matthew not only draws us out of that Old Testament into what we collectively call the New Testament but it also has this amazing way of taking the collective content, the collective message of scripture and allowing us not just to see a gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, which it does, but it allows us to see the total message of scripture, the entirety of the Bible.

Tonight we continue with probably one of the most famous sections, if not the most famous sermon that Jesus Christ ever spoke, we call it the Sermon on the Mount, rightfully so because he was in an elevated place, he was there gathered around with a multitude of souls and he began to speak and to preach and teach them that which was important and necessary for their lives. You will see tonight that there's a very extensive chart that is on the screen. For those of you not with us the last time, we're going to be at the bottom third of this chart tonight but this utilizes an incredible technique to help us understand the breadth and the depth of this passage.

Before we get into the specifics of Matthew 5, specifically tonight verses 9 through 12, let me give us all a fresh reminder of where we are in scripture and how we can best learn from it. It's kind of a 1, 2, 3 methodology. Here is the 1. There is one audience that has gathered to hear what Jesus is going to preach and teach, and I know you may have heard me say this numerous times, particularly not only in the gospel message, but particularly what we know as the Sermon on the Mount, but as you and I know it, as you and I see it, there is not one single person who is gathered hearing the words of Jesus Christ who is a born-again believer in Jesus Christ. There's not one now. I didn't say they didn't believe. I didn't say they didn't have faith. I didn't say they didn't have expectations, but a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ is one who not only acknowledges their sin condition but believes he lived a sinless life, he died a sacrificial death and heroes a victorious resurrection. Death and resurrection has not occurred as of this specific historical time when Jesus is gathered. In fact, the overwhelming majority, if not all of those that would have been present that day when he spoke these words, most assuredly would have had some exposure to and/or had been subject to the baptism of John the Baptist. And when you go to the river Jordan, when you go to what we know as the Sermon on the Mount, we have this collective audience of individuals who for the majority of their life had not just been exposed to, but had been expected to fulfill and/or expect their relationship with

the Lord through the Jewish Old Testament sacrificial system. In fact, it was John the Baptist on the River Jordan who said bring fruits unto repentance. He baptized them and then he pointed to Jesus Christ. He said, "Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world."

As we go through what we know as the Sermon on the Mount, tonight we'll finish what we know is the Beatitudes. One of the things that you're going to see is that Jesus Christ is going to take that which they had been taught growing up in the synagogue, that which was rooted in the Old Testament scrolls, and he's going to springboard them to the life, the ministry and eventually the death and resurrection that he would fulfill on theirs and on our behalf.

There's one audience yet there are two subject matters collectively in the Sermon on the Mount. For those of you that have not been a part of our study recently or lately, allow me to dissect these two. In the gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, there are two phrases that are necessarily understood, what we know as the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God. Now oftentimes in our culture and in our climate today, we take those things and we kind of merge them together, but 2 Timothy 2 says that we're to rightly divide the word of God. That being said, the kingdom of heaven as spoken is mentioned in no other gospel other than Matthews, okay? Heaven is that which is tangible, that which is real, that which can be handled, that can be touched, it can be seen with our eyes. God, according to John 4:24 is spirit and truth. We must worship him in spirit.

And in truth, one of the things that we discover about the kingdom of heaven, particularly as mentioned in Matthew 5, the beatitudes of what we know as the Sermon on the Mount, is it as a message to the literal fulfillment of the reign of Jesus Christ on the earth. But then there's the kingdom of God, the kingdom of God is where he reigns in our hearts. The kingdom of God is what you and I today would collectively say or talk about our salvation, our relationship with the Lord. The kingdom of heaven is only mentioned in Matthew, it's not mentioned in any other gospel and yet, in Matthew 6, in what we know as the Sermon on the Mount, there is one slight reference to what we know as the kingdom of God. Why is this important? Because even though there is one audience that is before him, Jesus Christ is going to discern, he's going to delineate the difference between what it will look like when he comes and he reigns on the earth and what it looks like when he reigns in our hearts.

And lastly, there are three means or ways to approach every scripture whether it be Matthew 5 or any other. Every passage that we have within our Bible needs to be filtered through these three mechanisms: it has a historical application; it has a doctrinal application; it has a spiritual application. Simply put, that means that every story, every passage, every message, every miracle in the Bible happened in real time to real people at a real location. That's historically. Doctrinally, it was spoken to or done on behalf of a certain people at a certain time for a very specific reason. Spiritually, in spite of whether the doctrinal application does or does not apply to us, we cannot deny its practical application to our lives.

Allow me to illustrate. The Israelites spent 400+ years in what we know as slavery in Egypt. The Lord uses Moses, his brother Aaron, to deliver them out, those famous of those plagues that take place, the deliverance through the Red Sea and ultimately the wilderness experience. As the Israelites are wandering through the wilderness, the Lord supernaturally provides for them. In fact, we know this as the manna from heaven. There is a time, every day which the Israelites would go out and they would discover this substance upon the ground that would nourish their bodies. Now there were some qualifications to the manna. The first qualification was you ate what you picked up and you didn't hold anything for the next day. In fact, the Bible says if it was held over for the next day, it would become rotten with worms. The other qualification was that on the Sabbath day from Friday evening to Saturday evening, you were not to eat or to collect any. So, on Friday morning, the Lord would provide a double fold so that on Saturday it would be preserved, even though on any other day it would be rotten with Worms. We know that it happened in the wilderness. We know approximately the time frame and the characters that are involved. Doctrinally speaking, manna from heaven is a specific time where God specifically fed his people at a specific place for a specific purpose. You and I today, at least let me speak for myself, tomorrow morning when I wake up I'm not expecting manna to be in the front yard of my house. But spiritually speaking, does the Lord not provide us every day with that which feeds our soul and feeds our spirit? Some days he even gives us a double blessing for those days that we seem, or it appears to be, "dry in our lives." And the reason I use that simple illustration is because it needs to be utilized for what we know as the Sermon on the Mount. This was a very different audience than you and I this evening. It was a subject matter that oftentimes we are limited in our discussion. And so, as we talk about this "kingdom of heaven," as we talk about these final beatitudes, we cannot neglect that even though we were not there and even though we do not have their background, there are teachings, there are truths here that apply even to our lives as well.

Before we get into verse 9, just a reminder to all the information that is on the chart behind me. Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven, he talks about that which will come, he speaks of that physical, that tangible reign upon the earth. In Matthew 25, he speaks of it happening. In fact, Matthew 24 and 25 is known as the Olivet Discourse as Jesus Christ sat there on the eastern side of the Temple Mount and he talked about that which would befall in the days that we know the last days or what we collectively call the second coming. Matthew 25, he talks about himself coming in glory. He talks about coming and standing upon the earth. He talks about those who are on his right hand, those that are on his left, those who are going into the kingdom prepared for them, and we will discuss tonight that which they did to inherit it, those on the left to the lake of fire according to verse 41 of chapter 25, prepared for the devil and his angels.

Tonight, as we turn to Matthew 5, beginning in verse 9, it's just four very simple verses. Not only does it speak incredible doctrinal truth about the audience that was gathered before Jesus but I believe tonight it's going to challenge each and every one of us to our core. It says,

9 Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. 10 Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. 12 Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

You know, it's interesting that what we know as the beatitudes begins with almost a positive message, the meek shall inherit the earth, those that desire the things of God shall see God, but it ends in a very dire manner. It speaks about being persecuted. It speaks about trials. There's even this parallel to the prophets of days of old. Why is that important? Because last time I checked, the prophets are a lot like artists today, they were not popular nor valuable until they were dead. Have you noticed that oftentimes the most valuable expression of one's creativity, whether it be the visual arts, even the musical arts, is not truly appreciated until after one breathes their last breath. And so, it is with the prophet of God and as we'll see tonight, so it is with the person of God, oftentimes the life of faithfulness that we live for the Lord is rarely recognized, rarely appreciated until that time where we hold a funeral or memorial service on their behalf. Isn't it interesting that it's in those times and those days where we look back at faithfulness, we look back at fervency and we recognize all that that individual, that man or that woman did on behalf of the Lord. And so, the parallel here, the prophets of the Old Testament were rarely, if ever, popular in their contemporary day. In fact, much the opposite. Remember Amos? Not only did Amos speak a message of vile rebuke to the Israelites, but the high priest told him, "You know, your message would probably be better somewhere else than here."

The last three of these famous beatitudes, I want to walk through them systematically this evening. The ninth of them says, "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God." Now, if you're able, I want to encourage you to turn a few pages to the right, to the gospel of John 1. I know that some of you may think I make an almost an exaggerated expression regarding this audience that is there listening, the timeframe, the chronology by which Jesus is speaking here in Matthew 5. But in the gospel of John, which is famous for chapter 3, verse 16, among other verses, I want to begin reading in verse 11. It says, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not." Now who are his own? That's the Jewish people, the tribe of Judah. It's the same audience that's gathered in Matthew 5.

Verse 12, "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." Now, why do I draw your attention to that passage? Because back in Matthew 5:9 it says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, they shall be called the children of God." That's not what John 1 says. John 1 says, "Blessed are those who receive him, who believe on him, they shall be the children of God." That is why it is so important that here in Matthew 5 it's talking about the kingdom of heaven, the reign of Christ, the rule of Christ. In John 1, it's speaking of him reigning in our hearts. It's speaking of that relationship with him.

So, if we go back into that doctrinal expression, why does it say that in the kingdom of heaven, why does it say in that end time scenario, that second coming situation, why does it say, "Blessed are those that are the peacemakers, that they shall be the kingdom, or they shall be called the children of God"? You see, when we speak about the kingdom of heaven, the reign of Christ, the events immediately preceding that as laid out in scripture or a time of great turmoil, time of great tragedy, even Jesus Christ in Matthew 24 called it a time of "great tribulation." And I know I spoke to it briefly this morning, there is a primary character during that time period that we collectively refer to as the Antichrist, who will remove and he will take away all peace from the earth. In fact, it will be vileness that reigns, it will be destruction that will be standard operating procedure. The only peace that can be found during those days are those who resist and those who reject him, not just that famous mark, but the entirety of his reign and his rule, though it be for a brief time period.

Matthew 25, when Jesus brings those on his right hand and on his left, he shares with them on the right, "Go into the kingdom that was prepared for you," and there's this interesting response because it's almost as if they don't understand. "Why are we allowed in? What is it that we did?" Interesting verse 35 of Matthew 25, he says, "I was a stranger and you took. Me in." An agent of peace in a world dominated by death and destruction, it says those that were agents of peace, those that reached out to their fellow brother and those that were willing to give of themselves and to go that "extra mile," He said those were those that were prepared not just in action but in heart for his return.

How does this apply to our everyday lives? I mean, after all, you and I, today 2,000 years later, this side of the empty tomb as believers in Jesus Christ, we have been called to be agents of peace. Let me remind you the fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 5:22 and 23. It says, "the fruit," by the way, that singular "of the Spirit is love, joy, peace." What is peace? Peace is bringing that which seems to be in opposition and getting them or that situation on the same page. One of the things that I've noticed about believers in Jesus Christ is that because of the Holy Spirit within us, we're able to bring peace to a situation that has no peace. We're able to bring a calmness to a situation. We're able to bring some type of civility to that which is incredibly unstable. There is just something about the presence of the Holy Spirit in any situation that can and does bring peace. I find it a little bit ironic in a world that does nothing but promote peace, those who are the agents of peace are rarely if often invited to be instruments of the solution to the problems by which are being discussed.

Next to the last beatitude says, "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake" for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Now again, remember, doctrinally speaking, we're dealing with those immediately before what we commonly refer to as the second coming, those days of trials and tribulation. It says they will be persecuted and in the book of Revelation 13 there's a famous section, verse 16 through 18, about this famous mark of the beast, and tonight, we're not here to discuss what it may or may not be throughout time and throughout history, we have collectively as a Christian body, we have missed more than we have succeeded in guessing what we think it may or may not

be, but here's one thing I want to share with you for an absolute surety in fact tonight: that those who reject that famous mark, those who say, "I will not be on the Antichrist page, I will not endorse, I will not promote," do you think that a character who the Bible calls the Beast is going to say, "No big deal. Do what you want to do. It's okay. I don't mind." No, he says they can't buy, they can't sell, they can't do commerce. In fact, the picture that we have is that they are "running for their lives."

Interesting in Matthew 25:40, this group that comes into this kingdom of heaven questioning why they are allowed entrance, questioning why they are seen in such light, what is it that Jesus says to them? "Because you have done it unto the least." You know, one of the most amazing phenomenon that we witness in our world today is that oftentimes those with the least are the most generous. Oftentimes those with the most are the most greedy and the most stingy in time after time as we do studies regarding what we know is generosity. Now you understand in our context tonight, when I speak about generosity I'm speaking of faith-based biblical giving. But oftentimes our studies in our country of generosity go beyond the faith community just to charitable giving, whether it be financial, time, etc. Did you know that in our world today, now this is just the numbers as they're laid out, again, I'm not speaking to you specifically, I'm not speaking to this local congregation specifically, this is just a coast-to-coast study that right now, as you and I sit here, the average person who claims to be a believer in Jesus Christ and gives financially in some aspect to either a local church, a gospel-based ministry, etc., the average person gives approximately 2.4%. Okay, that's just an approximation based on all the data. You say, "Well, why is that so significant?" Because we actually gave a higher percentage during the Great Depression than we are today. Isn't that interesting during the Great Depression, we as a collective community had less than we do today but we gave more. And then the studies even segment it out what about different regions of the country, states, communities, and one of the things that's been discovered time after time is just using what we know as the "United States," that those entities, those states that collectively have the lowest per capita income often give the most to faith-based charities, ministries and/or churches.

It says, "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake." Jesus says, "You've done this unto the least." These individuals didn't possess the mark, they don't possess the means by which to do commerce, yet they're the only ones willing to assist. They're the only ones willing to help. There's something about that that wells up within us. What does that mean for you and I today? Believers in Jesus Christ will suffer to some extent a level of persecution. We're going to deal more with this in a moment as we deal with that last be beatitude, but in John 16:3, Jesus Christ makes it very clear that the persecution that comes upon believers, the adversity that comes upon believers is because those that are instruments thereof, they do not know the Lord. Now I'm not about to say that those who persecute believers are agents of or somewhat minions of the Antichrist, because he has not even been revealed as of yet this moment. But I think we could say they do so in the spirit therein. And as a believer in Jesus Christ, there is some level of persecution that will take place in our lives, whether it is of a physical means, a drastic measure or just a simplistic adversarial who often offices next to us, lives around the corner from us, or in some cases may even be related to us.

Finally, the last of the beatitudes, the one that parallels these prophets of the days of old. "Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for my name's sake." You know, as you study that last book of the Bible, as you study that time period that immediately precedes this famous kingdom of heaven, basically, Jesus is setting the stage here. He says as you prepare, as we look out for these days in the chronology thereof, this is what you can expect, that those who live during that tumultuous time period, as you walk through the book of Revelation, we see more of them lose their life than retain their life. In Revelation 6, it says there are a group of souls under the altar of God that have been persecuted for their faith, and they wore white robes and they cried out to God how much longer until you avenge our death? Revelation 11, there's these two famous characters, the witnesses, the identities we can discuss and debate later, but one thing we know is that the Antichrist figure does not like their message. He has them sacrificed. He has them killed in a public format and in the manner in which the way that it happens, shall we just call it as the Bible says, that their heads are removed from their bodies. In fact, the Bible says 3 1/2 days later their heads roll back on their body and they ascend up into heaven. It's a pretty wild scene. But what the Bible shares is this is the manner as it should be.

Why is this important? You know, humanity is always bragging on how we're evolving. Humanity is always claiming that because of our technology, because of our innovation, look at who we've become, but do you find it intriguing that even as today we walk in the 21st century, the process of removing or eliminating life as described in the book of Revelation has now gained prominence once again? How many times have we seen some type of video adaptation from the other side of the world where those that are a part of our culture, who are considered the enemies of their culture, how are their lives taken from them? The same way that happens in Revelation 11. In fact, we have this idea that that is the means thereof.

We discover according to Revelation 6, there are more that lose their life than retain their life in those days preceding what we know is the physical return of Jesus Christ. What do he say in Matthew 25? "You visited me in prison." You do know there are worse things than dying, right? Yes. In fact, over time I've heard numerous accounts of missionaries and pastors and preachers and believers in Jesus Christ who were imprisoned for their faith, oftentimes for years at a time, forgetting what day it is, forgetting the hours, forgetting what even year that it is. And there's oftentimes a consistent theme in these prison testimonies, that they prayed not for release but for eternal relief. They prayed. They said it would have been easier to go onto glory than it would have been to stay in the conditions in which they were. And so oftentimes we talk about the death, the destruction that happens there in the book of Revelation, but there are worse things than being immediately in the presence of the Lord. There was the suffering, the pain and the anguish.

So, what does this mean for you and I today? Again, we're not there on the mountainside when Jesus is speaking, we're not coming out of the street to Judaistic culture, and we haven't been to the River Jordan with John the Baptist. What does that mean to us? If

you're a believer in Jesus Christ, you will be spoken evil of. 2 Timothy 3:12, it says those who live a godly life, they will suffer.

Now, tonight I don't want to close with a contemporary spiritual barometer because to pawn an old phrase of American cinematography, we're not in Kansas anymore. You remember that line from "The Wizard of Oz"? We're not in Kansas anymore, and that line was spoken because the primary character in that story made into a movie was facing a life of difficulty, was facing a life that was different from that which had been grown up in. It was no longer a life of peace and tranquility, it was a life of constant tension and difficulty. You and I as believers in Jesus Christ, we are no longer living in a world where the majority of people who you meet on any given day are born-again believers, evangelical Christians, whatever terminology you want to give them. We no longer live in a day where those people that represent our culture and represent ideologies and philosophies are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. We're living in a day where there is a rise of the darkness and a diminishing of the light when it comes to the gospel in our culture and in our communities.

It says believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, they will suffer. Can I give you a spiritual barometer? How are you in your walk with the Lord? How is the world responding to you? Because I've got news for this day: if you and I somehow, someway are received, accepted and celebrated by this world today, we may not be the believer we think we are because it says that we will suffer. In the world today that doesn't just allow for but endorses and promotes everything that is contrary to the biblical record, how can we not but suffer?

There was a statement that was given to me years ago. I didn't realize how valid it was, then I'll transition it to our culture tonight. It said that leaders often say "No" more than they say "Yes." Let me share with you how that works out because when somebody is the leader, whether they're the coach of a ball team, whether they're the president of a company, or whether they're the head of their household, it doesn't matter what the leadership paradigm is, everybody wants the leader to promote and endorse what they want done, correct? However, the leader has a game plan. The leader has a strategy. The leader has a direction. The leader has a vision. And those who are true leaders say, "No, that's not a part of the vision. No, that's not a part of the game plan. No, that's not a part of our strategy." Well, you know as well as I know that we've seen athletes on the sidelines pitch a fit because the play they wanted to run, the coach said "No, it's not a part of the game plan." We've seen people get irate over those in leadership within our community and culture because that which they wanted was not received, endorsed, etc. No.

How does that apply to you and I today? If you're a believer in Jesus Christ and you say "Yes" to the world more than you say "No," you've got a spiritual barometer problem because, "No, that is not advocated in scripture. No, God does not promote that. No, God does not celebrate that. No, that is not what the Bible says. No, that is not biblical Christianity." I find myself today just begging for a situation to say "Yes" to because almost everything I hear, everything I'm exposed to is contrary to scripture. What does

that mean? According to this, I'm going to suffer. You know that people don't like it when you disagree with them. People don't like it when you say, "I love you but I can't support that." People don't like it when you say, "I want you to know I love you but no."

Sometimes the suffering is physical, more often than not, at least in our culture for you and I today, it is emotional, mental, and/or spiritual. I close tonight with a statement I've said probably numerous times in your presence, but it just so resonates: if you wake up tomorrow and you don't run into the devil face to face, you might be headed the same direction he is. It's a good measuring stick. It's a good barometer. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was speaking to a group of people coming out of Judaism regarding collectively what we know as the second coming, and if you just want to get overly simplistic, he was saying, "Guys, when these events start to take place you're going to suffer because you don't take the mark. You're going to suffer because you're going to be marginalized from society, economically, sociologically, etc." Let's apply that to our wives today. I'm not worried tomorrow about the implementation of the mark of the beast. I'm not worried about all those second coming aspects. But I am concerned that the life I live and the words I speak are honoring to the Lord and in a world that is so contrary to the Lord, how can I expect anything but suffering? How can I expect anything but opposition? The days, at least in my opinion, of biblical Christianity being not just accepted, but celebrated, are long and gone. And so today we as the body of Christ, have a privilege, we have a privilege. You say, "Privilege?" Yeah. We get at a little aspect to suffer a little on behalf of the one who suffered a lot. The early believers welcomed it. They championed it. Maybe we ought to as well.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. Tonight as we come, to our time of closure, to our time of decision, you may be that person who's never come to that faith decision in Jesus Christ, you've never come to that point in your life where you've confessed your sin condition and asked Jesus to save you. The Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Maybe tonight is that night. We champion it. We welcome it. We encourage you to do so. But tonight, I know there are many of us who've been walking with the Lord for years, some of us have been walking with the Lord for decades, and we could sit down and we could share stories of how different it looks today than it did then, but one thing we could say is the opportunity to bear the marks, to bear the suffering of the Lord Jesus Christ are more prevalent today than they've ever been in our existence. Maybe tonight it's not a decision of salvation, that's already taken place, maybe tonight it's not a decision of identifying with Christ through baptism, because that's already taken place, but maybe tonight it's about walking out of here in a few moments, more resolute and more willing to bear his marks on his behalf than ever before.

Heavenly Father, as we come to this time of decision, Lord, your word says that it does not return void. God, I know that in every one of our lives and every one of our families, everybody not just here in person, but those online, there is a myriad and a multitude of scenarios and situations that, God, we're just going to be honest with you tonight, we don't enjoy them. We don't enjoy suffering. We don't enjoy opposition. We don't enjoy what little persecution oftentimes comes our way. But God, you told us clearly that if we

honor you and we live for you, it would come and it would happen. So, God, I pray that as we prepare ourselves for this time of response, whether it requires a stepping out or not, God that we would at least be willing to stand and declare these words of truth, that we'd be willing to be resolute in our life for you, to stand before you, to stand on behalf of you, and if necessary to suffer for you. Help us, O God, tonight to relish in the calling that you've placed upon our lives. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.