

# Living Among The Thorns

New Castle Bible Church

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Text: John 15:18-16:4

## INTRODUCTION

The disciples were heartbroken when Jesus shared He's about to leave them.

*Where are you going?*

*Why can't we follow?*

*To the Father—we don't know how to get there?*

*Show us the Father!*

Jesus calmed His disciples' fears and comforted their hearts throughout John chapters 14 and 15.

*I'm not leaving you as orphans... I'm sending the Holy Spirit who will be with you forever.*

Jesus wasn't about to abandon His men. He would be with them through the Holy Spirit, and this night wasn't the end of the fellowship but a new beginning.

*My peace I leave you, my joy, my love*

*You are still attached to Me, like branches on a vine. Draw near. Draw strength.*

*You are more to Me than servants. You are My friends. Now love one another as I have loved each of you.*

John 13-15 is laced with such remarkable jewels. These chapters are a great love feast. They are so encouraging, comforting, uplifting... and then we come to the end of chapter 15. We move from God's love and our love for one another into "If the world hates you."

We're no longer basking in the broad sunlit uplands of God's love. We've descended from these high plateaus into some pretty dark caverns. I don't believe it's a mistake of any kind.

John 14:1-15:17 – Promises

John 15:18-16:4 – Persecution

God's promises help us endure persecution. They prepare us to live among the thorns.

How do you stay encouraged when coworkers laugh at you for being godly?

How do you stay strong when family members reject you for being a Christian?

You remind yourself of God's promises. Don't replay the past but remind yourself of all you know about God and His goodness. John 14 and 15 are wonderful chapters for this.

Our Lord had so much to say to His disciples in these chapters. They walked with Him and listened, but they were entirely unaware what was about to happen.

They had just celebrated the Passover meal. Jesus washed their feet, said He would be leaving, and then walked with His men outside Jerusalem's city walls. They were confused, riddled with questions, but still trusting Jesus when they stopped at Gethsemane.

From their perspective, Jesus would probably say a few more words and then keep walking as He departed into the night. But whatever they expected to happen, they never expected Judas to show up with a few hundred Roman soldiers. They never expected Jesus to be taken from them, but that's exactly what Jesus expected.

Jesus knew what His disciples most needed to hear. They didn't know what they needed, because they had no idea what was about to happen... but Jesus knew, and He prepared them for the persecution they would soon face.

John 15:18 – 16:4 is our passage this morning. It tells us that God is our comfort when we are persecuted. Perhaps you're listening, and you know what it's like to be rejected for taking your faith seriously... or you know what it's like to be ridiculed for not engaging in shop talk.

Let God be your comfort. He is our refuge, our savior, our friend. When the world rejects you, and it will in different ways, know that God hasn't rejected you. The world hates true Christians. When you experience this, it shows your closeness to God, confirms what Jesus said, and shows that God is really all we need. Persecution shows...

that God's people are His,  
that God's Word is true,  
that God's presence is enough.

John 15:18-16:4 — “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: ‘They hated me without a cause.’”

“But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.”

“I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you.”

## I. Persecution Shows that God’s People Are His

*John 15:18-25*

Persecution shows that God’s people are His. “If the world hates you” or more accurately, “Since the world hates you. It’s not maybe/maybe not, possibly, or potentially, but a statement of fact, and Jesus hashes that fact out for us.

Persecution is a clear sign that this world isn’t our home. It means we’re not accepted. We don’t belong here. When the world rejects you **for your faith**, that rejection affirms your connection to Christ.

Please do not misunderstand. Just because you have enemies, doesn’t mean you are being persecuted. I have known many, many Christians who seem to have a martyr complex. They like to stir the pot and then say that they’re suffering for Jesus.

No, you’re not suffering for Jesus. You’re suffering for being rude and boorish. Christian persecution happens because of Christ. It’s because of our witness. And when that happens, rejoice. It affirms your connection to Christ... and that’s very encouraging.

John 15:19 — “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”

*Jesus chose Me. I belong to Him now, and the fact that I belong to Him is proven over and over again by the way the world treats me.*

If you’re a Christian, growing in your love for Jesus...

- you probably will not be the life of the party at work or in school.
- you may be overlooked for a promotion or need to resign from a job.
- you may lose friends over time or have a strained relationship with family.
- you may experience pressure to conform.

Whatever the case may be, if you identify yourself squarely with Jesus, you will experience some degree of rejection for it... and that’s okay.

I used to think that persecution was physical (beatings or imprisonment), but that’s not Jesus’ view.

Luke 6:22 – “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they *exclude you* and *revile you* and *spurn your name as evil*, on account of the Son of Man!”

Jesus equated hatred with being excluded, being reviled or taunted, being slandered. Persecution isn't just floggings and stonings. Rejected by family, pushed out, called names.

Words cut like a whip... and they leave some pretty deep marks. But take heart—those wounds mean you belong to Jesus.

Jesus emphasized our closeness with Him in these verses. Comforting, but all this talk about persecution must have surprised the disciples. They had experienced some persecution.

*Wait... what? There's more coming?*

So, Jesus digresses in verses 22-25 help us understand. If God is so loving, and love marks His disciples... why would people actually hate them? Because we're a people who love what God loves. God's love doesn't overlook sin.

Verses 22-25 focus on guilt. Jesus' ministry made crystal clear that the world stands guilty before God. Jesus ministered in word and deed, powerfully confronting sin. This is something love actually does—deals with sin. Guilt isn't a bad feeling but a state of being condemned. Jesus told the world that it stands condemned.

Possibly some who are watching today stand guilty.

Apart from Christ, you are worthy of an eternal sentence executed by God to pay for your crimes against Him—your lusts, your lies, your greed. And there's nothing you can do to save yourself... but God sent His Son. Turn from your sin, and run to Christ for salvation.

Jesus said He's the only way to God. There is no other mediator. There is no other savior. This is your only hope, and this life isn't a dress rehearsal.

Not a popular thing to say today—it never has been, but this is what the Bible teaches. This message is so narrow and exclusive... *and you are you to tell me what I need?*

No one will care if you're a nominal Christian who's just a nice person, but if you love unbelievers enough to gently challenge their sin... you will make enemies.

John 3:19 says that the world hates God because "people loved the darkness rather than the light." Why do people love the darkness? "because their deeds were evil." People relish their sin, and let it consume them like Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*. They would rather sulk in the darkness that's killing them than come to the light.

The world loves darkness, and Jesus shines light into it... and that's the reason the world hates Him and all who are His disciples.

God is our comfort when we are persecuted. Persecution shows we belong to Him, and secondly, it shows us that God's Word is true. Jump down to chapter 16, where Jesus elaborates upon the kinds of persecution and what will happen.

## II. Persecution Shows that God's Word is True

*John 16:1-4*

John 16:1-2 — “I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.”

These verses get more specific into some of the kinds of persecution. He's clear—it's going to happen. If people love darkness, and you shine a light into their darkness, they won't like you. No surprises there, but Jesus said these things up front. Before He went to the cross, before the church was even born.

It's comforting to know that Jesus didn't lie to you. You knew from the start what would happen. In fact, the word for “falling away” in 16:1 means to be caught off guard or shocked.

Jesus' disciples expected a glorious kingdom. Jesus is the messiah, and the messiah was supposed to usher in an age of great blessing for Israel. God's people wouldn't be oppressed but exalted.

Zechariah 14:9 – “The Lord will be king over all the earth.”

Daniel 2:44 – “[God] will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed... it shall stand forever.”

Isaiah 52:9-10 – “...the Lord has comforted His people; He has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared His arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.”

So many verses like this in the Old Testament. Prophecies about the coming kingdom gave the Jews hope... and the disciples were no different. They awaited a kingdom, too. *Is it now? Is now the time?* The disciples expected that in their lives they would see Rome tread in the dust as God made good on all His promises to Israel... but that's not what would happen.

Jesus was setting their expectations: *Men, don't expect glory at this time but a cross.*  
*I'm telling you this so you aren't caught off guard or surprised.*

The disciples would be put out of the synagogue. They would be excommunicated, not just from religious life but from all aspects of Jewish life.

Recall back in John 9 there was a man born blind from birth. He testified about being healed by Jesus, which frustrated the Pharisees so badly that they excommunicated him. They cast him out of Jewish life.

And if this isn't bad enough... "whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God."

Persecution overwhelmingly comes from religion. It started with Jewish religion persecuting Christians. This was followed by Roman religion. Christians wouldn't worship the Roman gods, nor worship Caesar—no, they worshiped a crucified man as God. They were ostracized and persecuted.

Out of the Roman Empire arose the imperial church of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic Church wielded the authority of government to eliminate anyone it viewed as a heretic. This authority grew to its zenith in the 11<sup>th</sup> century with the Crusades and continued until the 18<sup>th</sup> century when nations began to separate church and state.

Church historian, John Dowling, estimated that from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century (1,400 years) the Catholic Church put to death tens of millions of so called heretics—many, many of whom were our brothers and sisters in the faith.

How could anyone think murder is holy? How could anyone think killing is a service to God? Verse 3 — "because they have not known the Father, nor Me." As Jesus said, men love the darkness... they love it so much as to worship a god who is pleased with murder. That's zealous devotion to a false god.

If Jesus had said nothing about persecution before He left, the disciples would've been shocked.

The disciples would have felt confused each time the world rejected them.  
They might have felt betrayed. *Jesus: Why didn't you tell us?!*

Jesus told His men these things that they "might remember" His words. There's comfort here. *Jesus told me the truth.* Comfort in knowing there's no fine print with Jesus, no bait-and-switch. Jesus wasn't a used-car salesman just trying to lock you into something you won't want. No, He was entirely truthful. *My Lord told me what it would mean to follow Him.*

It's not like you find out after 20 years in the church what it means to be His disciple. *Oh, wow, I had no idea that being a serious Christian might be costly.*

Jesus clearly said in Luke 9:23, "if anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me." *This is what means to follow Me.* It's total submission to Jesus. My life is no longer my own—I belong to Him now.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "When Christ calls a man [to be His disciple], He bids him come and die." That's what we're called to do. Die to our flesh, die to our desires—all of me belongs to My Lord now.

We may die physically for our faith. We may not. Whatever the case may be, I believe alongside there will one day be a glorious kingdom with Christ ruling the nations, a kingdom characterized by peace and joy... but not yet.

For the time being, we can expect rejection and opposition. It shows we belong to Christ and that His Word is wholly true. Persecution also shows that God's presence is enough. I need no other.

## I. Persecution Shows that God's Presence is Enough

*John 15:26-27*

John 15:26-27 — “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning.”

Jesus mentions the Spirit many times in His final night with the disciples...

*I'm leaving, but the Spirit's coming.*

*The world will hate you, but the Spirit's coming.*

So what exactly does the Spirit do? First, He **conforms** us to Christ.

In John 14:27, Jesus wanted His disciples to have His peace. How could He leave them while also ensuring that they have peace? The Holy Spirit.

In John 15:11, Jesus said He wanted His disciples to experience joy. Who would produce this joy in their lives? The Holy Spirit.

Galatians 5:22-23 says the Holy Spirit produces fruit such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The Spirit works within our lives to produce real fruit. He conforms us to Jesus Christ.

A second work of the Spirit is to **convey** all that He has heard.

John 16:13, says that the Spirit does not “speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to you.” The Spirit has declared to us what's written in this Book—the Bible. This is the message proclaimed to us from God by Him as He moved men to write it (2 Pet 1:21).

A third ministry of the Spirit is to **convict**.

Jesus said in John 16:8 — “And when He comes, He will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.” God's Spirit is at work in our lives, but He is also very active throughout the world.

Jesus said that the world would hate His disciples. Totally intolerant of their message. The world would persecute them, at times even to death. That's pretty heavy to hear.

*So what hope is there, Jesus? If the world will hate us, why bother engaging them?*

*Is there any chance of success when we proclaim the gospel? YES.*

The Holy Spirit. If He is at work in the world, convicting of sin, there's hope. He may have broken the hardest heart to prepare it to receive the gospel. It just might be ready. There's hope—actual hope that when you proclaim Christ, someone might actually be saved. That's amazing!

A final aspect of the Spirit's ministry is **comfort**. He is the Helper or Comforter, our *paraklaytos*. The word means to come alongside someone with comfort and encouragement. A *paraklaytos* could be a close friend, someone who is always there for you, someone who helps you. That's the Holy Spirit.

John 15:26-27 tells us that when the Spirit comes, "He will bear witness about Jesus." We will bear witness, but so will He. Jesus wants us to see that we are never alone in the world. God doesn't just send His sheep out among wolves saying "Good luck!"

*The world is going to hate that you, but I am always with You.*

Do you recall what Jesus said to His disciples in the Great Commission? Matthew 28 — He sent them out, saying "behold, I am with you always."

*Wherever you go, I go. I'm always with you.*

The Spirit conforms, conveys, convicts, and comforts.

He is the reason we grow to become like Christ.

He is the reason we know anything about Christ.

He is the One who gives hope when we engage the world.

He is the One who gives comfort when we are in the world.

Jesus doesn't give a list of resources that you'll need to be a faithful Christian. His Spirit is the resource you need. And in the midst of persecution, He is enough. God is our comfort.

#### EXHORTATION

J.C. Ryle was pastor who has greatly influenced me. He writes that, "a Christianity without a cross will prove in the end a Christianity without a crown." Scripture tells us in 2 Timothy 3:12 that "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

No way around it, but Jesus has said "I have not left you as orphans" (John 14:18). Throughout John 14-16, you feel His heart bleed with love for His disciples. He knows what will happen to each of them, even to each of us... and though Jesus is not with us physically, He is still our friend and comfort when we are persecuted for His sake.

When you are laughed at for taking a stand or slandered for being a godly person, it affirms you belong to God and not the world. It affirms that God has been perfectly truthful about what it means to be a disciple and that He is enough to endure it.

Take comfort in God. He is there.