

Persecution, as Paul is talking about in our epistle for today, is almost never what we think it is. Because we often associate persecution with something violent, right? Somebody telling you, "Deny Christ or I'm going to kill you." That sort of thing. That would be persecution. Or this idea of, "You have to believe this, or you have to do this, or we'll run you out of town. We'll make your life miserable." That's the sort of thing we usually associate persecution with. And part of the reason we do that, of course, is because of the martyrs, the Christians in the past who did lose their lives because they were Christians, or who were run out of town because of what they believe.

But I know from my own experience, Christians, that we don't experience that kind of persecution in our country today. I know I've never had my life threatened because I'm a Christian. And I've also never been run out of town because of what I believe. And I can guarantee that the same is true for all of you. And so because of this, Christians, because violence is not usually part of our experience, we are not ready for the persecution that does come. Because it's almost always something subtle. It's almost always something that's very hard to pin down. Because persecution literally means "to follow after somebody" or "to chase them" or "to follow them very closely." So persecution, then, is any kind of pushback that we get from following after God, or any kind of pressure which we experience because we say what God says. But because we associate persecution with violence, we aren't ready for these little kinds of pressure. Because often the smallest pressure, the smallest pushback at a crucial moment is the most dangerous thing of all, because it can cause us to do things that we wouldn't otherwise expect to do.

The Galatians in our reading for today, Christians, were experiencing this kind of pressure, this kind of pushback. Paul had come through at one point and preached them the Gospel. And they had come to believe in Jesus because of it. And that was a good thing. But after Paul left, some false teachers came in, preaching a very different gospel. These false teachers claimed to be Christians, of course. They claimed to be speaking the truth, but they were teaching lies instead. Because they told the Galatians, "If you really want to be saved, then you need to live like Jews. You need to submit to all of the Old Testament ceremonies." (Those ceremonies that Jesus had done away with.) "And above all, you need to be circumcised. Because Abraham was circumcised. Isaac was circumcised. And God made the promise that whoever belonged to Abraham would be saved. How can you claim," they said, "to belong to Abraham if you aren't doing what Abraham did? If you aren't circumcised? Do this," they said, "and you will be saved."

Now that was one thing all by itself, Christians. They might've been able to resist that. They might've been able to see it for what it was. But the problem was all of the pressure that came around it, the pushback that came along with it. And this pressure took several different forms. On the one hand, there just weren't that many Christians in those days. They were far outnumbered both by the world and by the Jews. So there was this pressure, then, to just conform, to go along with the crowd. "Everybody's doing it" kind of a thing. "Your fathers did it. Your grandfathers did it. Everyone you know has done it. Abraham did it. Isaac did it. How can you claim to be any different? How can you claim to be better than they are? You should be circumcised too." And that would be a very difficult thing for them to deal with, trying to deal with all of that pressure of "everybody's doing it."

But there was also pressure because the false teachers were pointing to the Bible. They said, "See, here it is in the book of Genesis where it says you're supposed to do this! God tells you to do it. So why aren't you listening to God?" They were misinterpreting it, of course. They were teaching falsely because they didn't understand. But that's also a very difficult thing to deal with, to say, "This is what God seems to want, so why are you going against God?"

But probably the most serious kind of pressure that they were dealing with was this threat of violence that hung over them. Because the Jews in other cities had actually attacked the Christians for believing what they did. Paul himself had once persecuted Christians, dragging them off to prison and having them put to death. So there was this unspoken pressure that you need to do this or else. Or else things are to be pretty rough for you. Things aren't going to go the way you want. And under all of that pressure, Christians, the Galatians were starting to give in. They were saying, "Well, maybe we do need to do this. Maybe we need to be circumcised."

Christians, do we not also deal with this kind of pressure, especially from the world around us? This pressure to conform, this pushback to just go along with the crowd, to do what everyone else is doing. And I know that in the world there's this vague sense that everyone else is going against us, that the culture is going a completely different way. And that can be a very difficult thing for us to deal with, because it's hard for us to stand firm for God when everybody else is doing something else. It's very hard to stand firm for God when every company in this country changes its logo in support of sodomy. It's very hard to stand firm for God when every movie feels an obligation to insert things that go against God's Word, even if it doesn't make any sense. It's very hard to stand firm for God when even children's shows have an agenda these days. There's this sense that it's all just around us, that it's all pushing in on us, and that can be very difficult to deal with. Sometimes we think it'd just be easier if we just went along with it, if we just didn't push back anymore.

But honestly Christians, that kind of pressure is actually the easier one to deal with. I know that sounds kind of strange. But it's because it's a pressure that's everywhere and yet nowhere at same time. We can't point to something and say, "Oh, it's coming from here," or point to something else and say, "Oh, it's coming from over here." And for that reason, we can kind of ignore it, right? We can turn off the TV. We can scroll past it on Facebook. We can just turn away from it, not pay attention, and everything will be fine. I can live my life the way I want to, because I'm just ignoring what's going on out there.

But the truly difficult pressure to deal with, Christians, is when it's right in front of us, when we are having to deal with somebody face to face, especially a loved one or a friend that we know well. When they ask us questions, even in an offhand way, there's no getting around it, is there? There's no ignoring it. There's no trying to weasel out of it. We have to deal with it right then and there. So when they ask us, for example, "what do you think about this?" on a moral question, we have to answer. Or if they say, "Do you really believe that?", we have to deal with it. We can't get away from it. And in that moment, Christians, when we are face to face with it, the temptation is strong to soften it up, to not say things as clearly as we should, or to even ignore it by trying to change the subject, or--God forbid!--denying it so that we don't have to deal with it anymore. We don't want to feel awkward. We don't want to feel like we are having to deal with this pressure. And so we just go along to get along. Because this is the kind of persecution,

Christians, the kind of pressure and pushback that we deal with the most, and it's the kind that we often fail to resist.

So what are we supposed to do then? How are we supposed to deal with this kind of pressure? Paul tells us we must stand firm! We must not submit again to a yoke of slavery. As he says in Galatians 5, verse 1: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." And what he's telling the Galatians is they shouldn't give in to this pressure. They shouldn't give in and go back to what they once were, because that's not who they are anymore. They are no longer slaves. They're no longer not following God. Jesus has made them new. And because of that, they should stay where they are. Because to give in to that pressure, to go back to that yoke is to turn away from the Lord. It is to turn back to slavery. So Paul is asking them very clearly, "What matters more to you: God or not feeling awkward?"

And this is the point that Paul wants to make with his story in our reading for today. Because he says Abraham had two wives: Hagar and Sarah. And each of these women had a son. Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, and Sarah gave birth to Isaac. But Hagar was a slave, and Hagar gave birth to Ishmael according to the flesh, because she was a young woman. We would expect her to have children. It makes sense that she got pregnant and gave birth to Ishmael. But Hagar represents the present Jerusalem. She represents all of those who do not believe in Christ: the unbelieving Jews and the false teachers. And to be under her is to kind of be a son of Abraham, but only in the way that Ishmael is. It is to be only according to the flesh and not according to the Spirit. And to be a son in that way is to not receive the things of God. Belonging to Hagar, he says, means that you will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But it's a very difficult thing, because Ishmael persecuted Isaac. The sons of Hagar persecute the sons of Sarah. And sometimes it seems like it would be so much easier to just give in, to just do what they want you to do, to go along with it, because then you don't have to fight anymore. That was the temptation that they were struggling with. Becoming once again the sons of Hagar.

But Sarah, on the other hand, was a free woman. Sarah gave birth to Isaac according to the promise, because she was a very old woman when Isaac was born. We would not expect her to have children. So it is a miracle that comes only from God. And she represents the heavenly Jerusalem, the Jerusalem above, those who believe in Jesus. So to belong to Jesus, then, is to be a son of Sarah.

And is not always easy to stand firm as a son of Sarah. We might want to give in. But Christians, we are free in Christ. We belong to Christ through his cross. And even though it can be hard to resist that pressure as a descendent according to the promise, it is a blessed thing. Because even if the world pushes back against us, God is for us, and they can never take us out of his hand.

So why should we fear, then, Christians, to speak the truth? Why should we fear to do what is right? Because as Jesus himself says, Matthew 10, "Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven." So don't worry about speaking the truth. God is with you. Don't just go along to get along, giving into that pressure from the sons of Hagar. God will take care of you. Say what needs to be said. Do what needs to be done. And God will give you the words to speak and the strength to do it. Above all, Christians,

confess Jesus before the world, and he will give you a crown which will never fade away. Stand firm. Do not submit again to slavery, because Christ has set you free to be the sons of Abraham forever.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, we thank you that you have set us free through your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us always to say what he would have us say and to do what he would have us do, knowing that he will strengthen us to do both to your glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.