

# Joy and Rejoicing Under Persecution by the State

by John Piper

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*As Christians, we are fundamentally free from human institutions and have a new citizenship in heaven, which gives us a radical freedom to live out our faith in this world.*

**Duration:** 41:28

**Scripture:** Romans 6:22, 1 Corinthians 7:22, 1 Corinthians 9:19, Philippians 3:20, Colossians 1:13, 1 Peter 2:11-12

**Topics:** "Christian Freedom", "Heavenly Citizenship"

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## Description

This sermon emphasizes the invincible joy and freedom found in Christian faith, highlighting the eternal citizenship in heaven that transcends earthly institutions and governments. It explores the radical Christian freedom that stems from being children of God, free from inherent authority in the state, and debtors to all people. The message underscores the importance of prioritizing heavenly citizenship over earthly allegiances and engaging in relentless good deeds despite conflicts with societal norms.

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## Transcript

Jesus Christ and his way of salvation is the only reality that sustains joy when our livelihood is taken away and our family is taken away and our life is taken away. The state, by God's design, has the power to take away our livelihood and our family and our lives if laws are put in place that regard us as criminals. Paul says in Romans 13 for rulers do not bear the sword in vain.

Swords are for killing and for confiscating and for imprisoning. That's what the state has the right to do in God's design. Therefore, the state cannot take our joy.

It can only take our lives. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice in that day and be glad for great is your reward.

In heaven, beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that comes upon you to test you as though something strange were happening to you, but rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings that you may rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. You had compassion on those who were in prison and you joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property because you knew that you had a better possession and an abiding one. The apostles left the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer.

Shame! Make my day. Therefore, since the state can only take our livelihood, only take our lives, only take our family, it cannot take our joy. It is finally and decisively powerless to defeat Christianity.

Every Christian that does not bow the knee to the state defeats it eternally. Therefore, if the church renounces Christianizing the state in this age and never Christianizes the state in this age, she remains triumphant through every apparent defeat, and there have been many. Witness North Africa, the Middle East, Turkey.

Should the Christian church renounce the Christianization of the state in this age? By Christianization, in America at least, I mean the vast majority of the congressmen and the senators, court justices, members of the executive branch, state, federal, would be Christians and would be enacting laws to enforce Christian morality because that is what the state does. It enforces with the sword. I think we should renounce the Christianization of the state, which also means I think we should renounce certain forms of post-millennialism, and here's the reason.

God ordained that there be a state, and he ordained that the defining mark, essence of the state be that human behavior may be constrained, compelled by death, imprisonment, confiscation, and pain. The king, Peter says, is sent, or the governors by him, to punish those who do evil. That's what the state is.

It is a punisher. Paul makes it plain that this punishment is with the sword. Of course, the state can influence behavior by praising good, by the rhetoric of statesmanship, but that's not unique to the state.

Churches can do that. Civic organizations can do that. What's unique and defining to the state is the power to kill and confiscate and imprison, and that's what God designed it to be.

And God ordained, besides the state, the church, and he did so on radically different foundations. Christ bought the church by renouncing the use of the sword and by sacrificing himself to save his enemies. He calls into being a people who die to themselves, take up their crosses, follow him, love their enemies, don't return evil for evil.

He brings the Old Testament law to an end so that from now on in this age, unrepentant sin is dealt with in the church, not by stoning, but excommunication. Now, by founding the state, and the church on such radically contrary ways of dealing with evil, God made two things plain. One, the day is coming when the state and the church will merge, and the state will be perfectly and totally Christianized, namely when Jesus returns and all-knowing, all-wise, all-just, all-good assumes the rulership of the world and deposes every ruler who does not rejoice in his supremacy.

The age of tolerance, the age of pluralism will be over, and he will come with the sword. The Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on all who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. That's one thing that's made plain by the radical distinction.

Here's another thing. This difference between the church and the state at their root makes plain that until he comes, there will be at best between Christians and the state a conflicted relationship, and at worst, a deadly relationship, and the deadliness happens most often when the compatibility is seen most complete. If you ask me, don't you pray the Lord's prayer? Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth the way it's done in heaven.

Do pray that, Piper. Oh, I pray that. Long for that, ache for that.

Bring your kingdom, O Lord. Establish your perfect will at every level, every structure of society on this planet by coming in person, and let it be soon. Maranatha.

Come, Lord Jesus, and until then, enable us to escape temptation, endure the cross, despise the shame, teach the nations, love our enemy. Yeah, I pray that. So, against the backdrop of the invincible joy of Christian faith and the backdrop of the final Christianization of the state at the return of Jesus, what I want to do is sketch a biblical picture of Christian existence in the institutions of the world, especially the state, that I believe is meant by God to protect us from wrongheaded otherworldliness and wrongheaded this worldliness.

A picture of a kind of radical Christian freedom that only Christians know as citizens of heaven and sojourners and exiles on the earth. So, I've got about four or five texts. You can either go with me to them or listen carefully.

We're going to go first to Matthew 17, 24 to 26. Matthew 17, 24 goes like this. When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two drachma tax went up to Peter and said, does your teacher not pay the tax? And he said, yes.

And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, what do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others? And when he said, from others, Jesus said, then the sons are free. That's one of the most important sentences in the Bible about life in this world. However, not to give offense to them, go to the sea, cast a hook in, take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth, you will find a shekel.

Take that. Give it to them for me and for you. What in the world is he saying? Here's what I think Jesus is laying down for the foundation of Christian existence in relation to the institutions of the world, and I think this teaching pervades the New Testament.

The authority of human institutions over Jesus and his disciples is nullified. And any submission to those institutions is rooted not decisively in the institution, but in God, who may or may not at any given time call for your submission to that institution based on other factors than any intrinsic worth in the institution or any inherent authority in the institution. The basis of this freedom is that the followers are sons of God.

Think about it. Paul calls it the freedom of the glory of the children of God. Romans 8.21. Must we pay the two drachma tax? Must we? No, not that kind of must.

The sons are free, free from that kind of obligation to the inherent authority of the institutions. However, pay it Peter, so as not to give offense, the children are free from human institutions. We relate to them on the basis of kingdom aims that don't come from this world.

And when we submit to a human institution, we're doing something totally different than what the world is doing. The children are free. Now, what did Peter make of that in his first letter concerning the state? First Peter chapter 2 verses 13 through 16.

It goes like this. Be subject for the Lord's sake, not for the emperor's sake, not for the governor's sake, not for the institution's sake. Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution.

I'm dropping to verse 16. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil. But living as slaves of God.

You would expect him to say sons of God, but he chooses slaves to put all the emphasis on the authority of God over against the authority of the emperor. Be subject for the Lord's sake. How? Knowing that you, the Lord's slaves, are free in your subjection.

And that freedom is not a cloak for self-indulgence, but a commission from the Lord. So we relate to the state on totally different foundations, a totally different footing than the world. We are free from human institutions.

That obligation has been nullified. In themselves they hold nothing over us. We are the children of the living God.

And thus, radically free in this world. We serve at the behest of a different master. Not any king, any governor, any president, any court.

Now, let's consider it in relation to slaves. How did Paul work it out in relation to slaves? Ephesians chapter 6, verses 5 and 7. Slaves, Ephesians 6, 5. Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as obeying Christ. That's my translation.

As obeying Christ. Your obeying of them as obeying Christ. Not by way of eye service, as a man pleaser, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a goodwill as to Christ, not to man.

Whoa, you talk about freedom. In other words, Christian slaves, your submission to your master is totally different than the submission of all other slaves. It is on a totally different footing your obedience to your masters is only required and only good as obedience to Christ.

You are serving the Lord and not man. Not man. Not man.

Not man. That obligation is nullified. There is no inherent authority in a master over a slave.

All is from Christ. All is for Christ. When you submit, you submit to Christ, and in that submitting, you are free.

And so it is in 1 Corinthians 7.22. 1 Corinthians 7.22. He who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise, he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. Slaves are Christ's freedmen.

Citizens are Christ's freedmen. All of life in human institutions is on a new footing. Human institutions are dethroned.

Their inherent authority over the children of God is nullified. We have one Father, one Lord, one final authority. If and when He says, serve, we serve.

If not, not. For His sake. Here's the way Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 9.19. 19.

For though I am free from all, nevertheless I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win them all. The foundation of Christian existence in this world and the aim of Christian existence in this world are totally different from the world. You're not your own.

You were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. Bought by God to glorify God.

Foundation, aim, totally different. And it better show. Now, end of exposition, seven implications for this year, and they are serious.

One. As redeemed children of God, our primary and decisive citizenship is in heaven, not America or any other country. With the transfer of our citizenship to heaven, we have become sojourners and exiles in America and everywhere else on the earth.

Philippians 3, our citizenship is in heaven, our citizenship is in heaven, our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior who will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself. That's who we are. It's a total glorious orientation in this world.

First Peter 2.11. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles, abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against your soul. When Christ died for his church, she died with him to the elemental things of the world, died to the law, died to the world, died to sin. Then she rose to walk in newness of life, new birth, new person, new creation, new covenant, heirs of a new earth.

Christ has delivered us. This is Colossians 1.13. Christ has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son. Transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his beloved Son.

We have passed from death to life. We are seated with Christ in the heavenly places. This is why we are fundamentally free from human institutions.

We've already died. We live in heaven. We live in heaven in a most profound way.

If that's meaningless to you, you got work to do. That's why we exist in this school. That's the work we have to do.

If that's a meaningless reality to you, that you live mainly in heaven now, you got work to do on your Bible and your heart and your head and your life. It's not meaningless. It's profoundly transforming of everything.

When we testify as Christians to other Americans, we are not calling them to make America great. We are advocating for a transfer of citizenship, an eternal one. Number two, we are free from any inherent authority in the state.

We can look Nero or the Supreme Court in the eye and say, you have no final authority over me. You have no inherent authority over me. Whatever service, whatever submission we render, we do so wholly because of our heavenly citizenship and the Lord Jesus.

Here's the punchline. This should affect the way we engage with human governmental processes so that our involvement points to a reality different and higher and an allegiance that is utterly other. Submission to the processes of government that don't have the aroma of heaven is a betrayal of our supreme allegiance to our heavenly homeland.

It is a failure of heavenly patriotism. It is the porch of the house of heavenly treason. Number three, Christ has set us free not only from the institutions of this world, but also from ourselves.

Once we were in bondage to sin and selfishness, Romans 6.22, but now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life, which is why radical freedom from human institutions does not become a cloak of evil and does not become a license

for civic uselessness. No book in the New Testament signals as clearly and consistently the inevitable conflict between Christian exiles and unbelieving civic society than 1 Peter, and yet no book in the New Testament is more consistent with calling for a life of relentless public good deeds than 1 Peter. 2.12, 2.14, 2.20, 3.6, 3.11, 3.13, 3.16, 3.17, 4.19. Do good, do good over and over and over.

And those good deeds are not insider political governmental good deeds. They are good deeds from the margins done for those who revile us, because Christ has freed us from selfishness, not from civil institutions and not just from civil institutions. Unbinding us from the state does not make us unuseful for others.

Number four. In freeing us from all people, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9.19, God has made us debtors to all people. I am under obligation, I am a debtor to both Greeks and barbarians, both wise and foolish, but we are still in being the debtor of every person radically free, because we are debtors not to serve their will but to serve their good.

This is the mind of Christ. Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others. Number five.

Submission to the state or any other human authority is not absolute. It is relativized by our new citizenship, by the supreme authority of Christ, and by the call to magnify him above all human value. And therefore the apostles answered the authorities, whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge.

We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard. We must obey God rather than men. Number six.

The right to vote, therefore, in America is not a binding duty for Christians in every election without regard to other factors. The children are free, free from human institutions. As citizens of heaven, we are not bound in every situation to participate in the processes of human government.

We're not bound. This is not our homeland. We vote if we vote because the Lord of our homeland commissions us to vote, and he does not absolutize this act above all other considerations of Christian witness.

In this election, with the flagrant wickedness of both party candidates, the logic, listen carefully, the logic that moves from be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, to the binding obligation always to vote, is blind to three things. Number one, it is blind, that logic is blind to the radical meaning of for the Lord's sake, and how it relativizes all human authority and brings to bear many, many other considerations. Number two, the radical freedom of the children of God from inherent authority of human processes and governments and institutions.

And three, it is blind to the aim of every citizen of heaven in all their human engagements to display our allegiance to the values of another world. I'm not saying we are bound not to vote. I am saying the children of God are free, free to hear the voice of their master about the best way to witness to his supremacy.

I will vote, but not for these two candidates, unless a supernatural intervention of cataclysmic proportions happens in the next seven days with profound transformation. Then I might consider it. Finally, number seven, when we weaken, this is a great burden I have to close with, when we weaken our prophetic stance as citizens of heaven and fail to distance ourselves from great moral evil in a presidential candidate

or two, or anywhere else.

When we fail to distance ourselves from great moral evil, we have strayed into a wrong-headed this worldliness that seeks to wield the power of the state to secure our Christian rights, when in fact the rights of the children of God cannot be taken away by men because they weren't given by men. Our rights, our Christian rights are to belong to Jesus, to stand justified before a holy God, to own everything and inherit everything, to love our enemies, to do good to those who persecute us, to return good for evil, to treasure Christ above all things, to live forever in overflowing joy in the presence of God. Those are our blood-bought rights.

They cannot be secured by laws. They cannot be taken by courts. Our blood-bought rights as Christians, our freedoms, our essential defining freedoms as Christians, citizens of heaven, are not the same as freedom of religion, freedom of worship, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly.

Christ didn't die for those. In this age, he'll come with the sword one day and secure them. In this age, he didn't die for that.

All those freedoms, precious as they are, I'm glad I can do what I'm doing here, precious as they are, can be taken away, and nothing essential will be lost from Christian freedom. Nothing. Therefore, another important almost final sentence.

When we seek to use the power of the state to secure these civic freedoms as if -- I'm sure I'll be misquoted on this one, that's why I'm saying that, so you won't -- when we seek to use the power of the state to secure these freedoms as if the loss of them would be the loss of our Christian faith, we betray the loss of our bearings, and that we have fallen into a wrong-headed disworldliness, and that I taste in many places. As citizens of heaven, our freedoms and our joy are invincible and everlasting. They cannot be taken from us, no matter what.

Our livelihood can be taken, our family can be taken, our lives can be taken, but our joy and our freedom cannot be taken, period. Christ bought them with his blood, and anyone, anyone, anyone, and everyone, everyone, everyone may have them if they would embrace him as supreme. And the proclamation of that truth, that gospel truth to all the peoples of the world is ten thousand times more important than this election and the existence of America.

Amen. Let's pray. So, Father, make yourself great.

Jesus, be exalted among your people. Grant us divine wisdom to navigate life in human institutions. Grant us to set our minds on things that are above and not on things that are on the earth, where our lives are hidden with Christ in God.

Grant us, O God, not to be useless. May our lives show that we have been freed, not only from human institutions, but from ourselves. This is the great bondage, self.

Oh, that we might be free and pour our lives out with innumerable good deeds in this world, even for those who hate us. Oh, stamp your church with this inexplicable and otherworldly citizenship, I pray. Don't you stand for the benediction.

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, give you wisdom, give you peace.

And everybody said, amen. You're dismissed.

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