

Blessed Are They Who Are  
Persecuted for the Sake  
of Righteousness,  
for Theirs Is the Kingdom  
of Heaven

*Scott Rose*

His feet were bound, his head bowed, surrendered to the pain and power of persecution.

I was as shaken as he was. It was Juan's first day of what, to our shock and dismay later, would turn out to be a two-year incarceration for pushing a classmate in Maryland's Prince George's County. Neither of us could speak the other's language. He just kept motioning to me, tearfully, that he wanted a hug. I gave him a quick embrace. His leg irons clanked in the emptiness.

From the beginning, I knew this boy was not an oppressor. But it took me several years to realize that neither was the legal system that overly prosecuted him. His persecutors were the drug cartel and gangs in El Salvador that hunted him and a vicious rape when he

*Blessed Are They Who Are Persecuted*

was eight years old that haunted him. This persecution drove him from El Salvador into a U.S. jail—nowhere near the kingdom of heaven that Jesus promised in his Sermon on the Mount.

I first met Juan several years before, representing him in a Prince George's County court. He was emotionless, due to what I then thought was shyness but later realized was depression. Juan's father had abandoned the boy when he was one year old and died soon after. Juan's mother had used excessive discipline. Fearing for his life, the boy had fled El Salvador because the drug cartel was killing Salvadoran boys to keep them from joining gangs that had become barriers to the cartel's business. Juan had successfully avoided recruitment by the gangs but became hunted by the cartel. Emblematic of the chaos in El Salvador, Juan was threatened simultaneously by bad guys on both sides. So he fled, alone, to the United States, was detained at the border, and placed with his aunt in Prince George's County, pending deportation proceedings.

After a successful first step in a Prince George's County Circuit Court, we applied for his green card. Several months from receiving it, Juan made a mistake that jeopardized his entire future. Depressed and lonely, he hung out with a classmate who had a connection to a Prince George's County gang. While not a member of the gang, the friend was being recruited to join, and