

# The Christian and Persecution – No. 1

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## Introduction

Life is a testing ground, a time of probation. The tests, trials, temptations, and challenges come in many forms and from many sources. Some are easily recognized because they are so painful at the moment. Some tests and temptations may be difficult to recognize because they are not only painless, but they offer reward and produce pleasure.

We read no further than the sixth verse of Peter's first epistle before we learn that it is addressed to God's people who have suffered manifold grievous trials. In fact, he alludes to their sufferings in all five chapters of 1 Peter, involving the sizable total of twenty-two verses. Anyone who has lived as a faithful Christian very long can readily identify with the experiences described and addressed by Peter, even if not to the same degree. A wicked world will always see to it that those who are determined to live as God directs will suffer for it. Such persecution against the godly became increasingly common in our nation as the twentieth century drew to a close, even though, ironically, America was founded by men who believed in God and in the Bible as the Word of God. One who strives to live faithfully will find that life holds many trials and persecutions – **just because one is a Christian.**

## Preliminary Definitions

Our English words *trial* and *temptation* are both found in Peter's letters. *Trial* is found twice in 1 Peter, once in its plural form (1:6) and once in the singular (4:12).<sup>1</sup> *Temptation* is found once (2 Pet. 2:9). All three of these are translated from a cognate of the Greek verb *peirazo*.<sup>2</sup> This word is capable of various connotations, depending on context. Vine points out that it "signifies to try, attempt, assay...; to test, try, prove in a good sense...; [or] in a bad sense, to tempt...of attempts to ensnare...; of temptations to sin...; of trying or challenging God..."<sup>3</sup> Vine says concerning the noun form, *peirasmos*: "used of trials with a beneficial purpose and effect, of trials or temptations, Divinely permitted or sent...; with a good or neutral significance...; of trials of a varied character... Of trials definitely designed to lead to wrongdoing...; of trying or challenging God, by men..."<sup>4</sup>

The specific connotations of *peirazo* must therefore, for the most part, be determined by the context in which it is used. Apparently two of its major distinctive shades of meaning are observable as Peter uses it.

**First**, there are challenges and trials which involve temptation to sin. These occurrences contain the elements of enticement, solicitation, and seduction— they attack from within the person. They are events pertaining to our lives that Satan uses and through which he appeals to fleshly desires in an effort to cause us either to neglect or transgress the law of God. This seems to be the sense in which Peter wrote, “The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptation...” (2 Pet. 2:9; cf. 1 Cor. 10:13) and is definitely the sense in which James employs *tempted* and *tempteth* in James 1:13–14.

**Second**, there are trials that are “neutral” relative to enticement or seduction to sin. These occur because: (1) we are physical creatures and we live among and are affected by other physical creatures, (2) we live in a world generally dominated by wickedness, and (3) our world is bound by blind physical laws. These trials attack us from the outside. Men sometimes bring such trials on themselves by their own behavior (e.g., consequences of personal sin, carelessness, foolhardiness, etc.). Men suffer other trials of this sort randomly (i.e., apart from personal cause or fault) as “part of life” (e.g., terminal diseases, automobile accidents, financial losses, personal/property damage from storm or fire, grief, et al.).

There are trials that are peculiar to Christians (persecution “for righteousness’ sake”), which are allowed by God to test and strengthen our faith. Trials, whatever their form or cause, may make one either stronger or weaker spiritually, depending on how one reacts to them. In none of these trials is there an actual enticement or encouragement to sin. However, one can be caused to sin by his reaction to trial and persecution (e.g., denying Christ to avoid persecution). Context suggests that the trials of which Peter writes are those that cause his readers suffering, pain, and loss **because they are Christians**, the overcoming of which renders one approved.

Peter also uses two other words related to his discussion of trials. The words *proof* (“trial,” KJV) (1 Pet. 1:7a) and *proved* (“tried,” KJV) (v. 7b) are from *dokimazo*, meaning “[a test] primarily, of metals..., to prove, ...more frequently to prove with a view to approval.... A test, a proof, ...the means by which a man is tested and proved....”<sup>5</sup>

With these preliminaries we now turn our attention to the trials of Christians, which relate to persecution.

### **The Fact of Persecution**

It is apparent that the saints addressed by Peter (“the elect who are sojourners of the Dispersion,” 1 Pet. 1:1) are undergoing some challenging experiences of many and varied kinds:

“...Though now for a little while, if need be, ye have been put to grief in manifold trials.” The beginning of the epistle of James is parallel to the above. First, he addressed his letter to the same brethren (“the twelve tribes which are of the Dispersion,” Jam. 1:1), Second, he then acknowledged their trials: “Count it all joy, my brethren, when ye fall into manifold temptations” (v. 2). While the word *temptations* is used (in both ASV and KJV) to describe what they were experiencing, an ASV footnote suggests *trials* as the possible meaning (see comments below on 1 Pet. 1:6). This suggestion has merit for two reasons:

- **First**, there is no indication in James 1:2–4 that they are being enticed or seduced to be unfaithful by means of these “temptations.” Rather, whatever they were experiencing was serving to prove or test (with a view to being approved) their faith (v. 3). The same is also true of Verse 12, in which James likewise connects temptations with the process of approval.
- **Second**, Peter is discussing the same subject with the same people, and he is most definitely talking about persecution. It therefore seems most likely that James is referring to the testing of their faith through persecution, with which the first century saints were well acquainted.

The persecution of the righteous began in the shadow of the Garden of Eden as righteous Abel was slain by his jealous brother Cain because Abel’s “works were righteous” (Gen. 4:3–8; 1 John 3:12). Persecution of the righteous continued throughout Old Testament history. The prophets of God were treated in especially brutal and shameful ways as they fulfilled their God-given tasks. They were made to suffer....

...trial of mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, they were tempted, they were slain with the sword: they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves, and the holes of the earth (Heb. 11:36–38).

The Lord acknowledged such in His brief statement: “For so persecuted they the prophets that were before you” (Mat. 5:12b). He reminded the scribes and Pharisees in Jerusalem of the blood of the prophets which their fathers had shed, and He accused His contemporaries of being just like them (23:29–32). He predicted that, when he would send prophets to their city again (likely a reference to the apostles), they would treat them as their fathers had done: “Some of them shall ye kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city” (v. 34). Then He wept as He further pointed out Jerusalem’s long history of murdering God’s spokesmen, knowing that they would soon do

the same to Him: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her!” (v. 37; cf. Luke 19:41).

The Lord had promised and warned that all of His disciples could expect to be tested through persecution. The final beatitude relates to persecution and the persecuted: “Blessed are they that have been persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mat. 5:10). This is the only beatitude upon which Jesus elaborated, giving it special emphasis with two full verses of commentary. Surely this fact is a signal that the Lord recognized the great danger that testing by persecution would hold for His followers. Just after Peter’s confession of Jesus’ Deity near Caesarea, the Lord issued a universal challenge: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23). The verses in the immediate context (21–22, 24–26) imply that the “cross” each disciple is called upon to bear daily, if necessary, is suffering brought about by being faithful to Christ, for His sake – persecution, whereby one’s faith is tested.

Such testing began even while the Lord was still on earth. In their jealousy of Jesus and His rising popularity, the Jewish leaders struck such fear into the hearts of the people that they would not even discuss Him openly (John 7:13). They further decreed that anyone who confessed Him as the Christ should be expelled from the synagogue, which happened to some (9:22, 34–35).

The Lord plainly and repeatedly warned the apostles of the persecutions they would suffer:

But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to councils, and in their synagogues they will scourge you; yea and before governors and kings shall ye be brought for my sake, for a testimony to them and to the Gentiles.... And ye shall be hated of all men for my name’s sake (Mat. 10:17–18, 22a).

But before all these things, they shall lay their hands on you, and shall persecute you, deliverng you up to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for my name’s sake (Luke 21:12).

Remember the word that I said unto you, A servant is not greater than his lord. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.... But all these things they will do unto you for my name’s sake, because they know not him that sent me (John 15:20–21).

The apostles most certainly saw the Lord’s warnings pertaining to them fulfilled as they variously suffered arrest, court trials, extended imprisonments, beatings, stonings, mob violence, being chased from town to town, manifold indignities, the threat of death, and even death itself (Acts 4:1–22; 5:17–40; 9:23–30; 12:1–5; 13:50; 14:2–6, 19; 2 Cor. 11:23–27, 32–33; et al.).

In the early days of the Jerusalem Church, the blood of martyrs soon began to fertilize the seed of the kingdom as Stephen, the fiery evangelist, was stoned to death (Acts 7:54-60).

This atrocity became the springboard for a wave of stringent, organized opposition by Jewish officials against the church in Jerusalem – under the relentless leadership of Saul of Tarsus (8:1-3). When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, he reminded them that they had “received the word in much affliction” and had afterward experienced suffering, persecution, and affliction (1 The. 1:6; 2:14; 3:3-4; 2 The. 1:4-7). The recipients of the Hebrews epistle were reminded that they had “endured a great conflict of sufferings; partly, being made a gazing stock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, becoming partakers with them that were so used...and took joyfully the spoiling of your possessions” (Heb. 10:32-34). And so it went with the saints in Philippi (Phi. 1:29-30), Galatia (Gal. 3:4), and other areas as well. The brethren to whom Peter wrote had been “put to grief in manifold trials” which were “fiery,” and which involved being called “evil-doers,” being “spoken against,” being reproached, and made to suffer because they were Christians (1 Pet. 1:6-7; 2:12; 3:16; 4:14; 5:9-10)<sup>6</sup>

To the warnings Christ gave about the sufferings that a wicked world would heap upon His followers, Paul added his inspired promise that reaches throughout all time – including ours: “Yea, and all that would live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12). Many a disciple has experienced exactly what Paul and Barnabas warned the brethren of: “that through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

### **The Varieties of Persecution**

Persecution has taken many forms and variations in different times and places, some of which I have already summarized. The injuries inflicted may be emotional (loss of friends or family, vilification, ridicule, humiliation, threat, anonymous phone calls or letters), economic (loss of job or promotion, destruction of property [as happened to the Hebrew saints, Heb. 10:33- 34]), or actual bodily harm due to violence (assault, torture, imprisonment, kidnapping, even death). A combination of all three of these has been employed at various times. In some areas of the world today (e.g., Communist China) organized official oppression (sometimes violent) of Christians and the Gospel still prevails.

In America the heinous philosophies of Hedonism, Humanism, Atheism, and Liberalism (political, theological, and moral) and the climate for persecution of the opposing force of Christianity have increased in parallels in the final quarter of the twentieth century. It seems

likely that these trials and tests to our faith will only accelerate as increasingly godless voters elect more and more godless officials after their own kind, who will pass increasingly anti-Christian legislation and appoint additional anti-Christian judges. While there is already some real persecution of the Lord's people in America, except for occasional isolated incidents, it is not violent, and it is at present perpetrated largely only by wicked individuals rather than as a matter of government-sponsored oppression.

However, if the new paganism embodied in the philosophies of the New Age and Post-modern movements – and fueled by the aforementioned forces – continues to gain ascendancy, the young generation of saints may well live to see calculated, legislated, government-sponsored, violent testing of their faith as in bygone ages. There are already some government regulations in place that have been applied by some judges so as to limit the discussion of the Gospel with one's co-workers on the job and to proscribe private religious meetings in homes.

The restrictions in public schools pertaining to anything related to the Bible are well-known (although witchcraft, pagan mysticism, Islam, "Native American" religion, et al., appear to have free expression). The so-called "politically correct" speech and thinking that have been forced upon practically every facet of our culture and society are almost altogether anti-Bible and anti-Christian. For the most part, the public education hierarchy, from preschool through university level, is under the control of radical, liberal extremists who despise rationality and exalt subjective "feelings." None of these developments are surprising to alert observers – their sources are the powerful, rabid Atheism and Liberalism already mentioned.

When it is a more shameful thing in the minds of many to cry out against the abomination of homosexuality than it is to **commit the act**, the forecast of worse trouble for God's people is evident. When our fellow citizens count it more reprehensible to **display posters showing the graphic results** of the abortion industry in protest of the practice than the murderous act itself, the signs are ominous for what may lie ahead. When a majority of our citizens appear to be more upset with the prosecutor who exposes the corruption and crimes of a morally bankrupt president than with **the president's pornographic and criminal behavior**, the precarious position of Christian morals is manifest. It does not require the wisdom of Solomon to see that if the militant homosexual and feminist forces continue to gain power, younger Christians may well eventually face federal legislation ordering congregations to install sodomites and women as preachers, elders, deacons, and teachers or else face crippling fines, seizure of property, and/or imprisonment. Will we be equal to the challenge?

## The Sources of Persecution

Persecution may come from a variety of sources. As indicated above, government has often proved a cruel source of oppression. Additionally, employers, supervisors, or teachers in public schools or universities can bring tremendous emotional and/or economic pressure upon those under their authority, even without legislative authority for their cruel work.

Family members and dear friends are sometimes sources of sore persecution and trial:

And brother shall deliver up brother to death, and the father his child: and children shall rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death.... Think not that I came to send peace on the earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother-in-law: and a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me (Mat. 10:21, 34-37).

Perhaps one of the most insidious sources of oppression and suffering for righteousness' sake is from one's spiritual brethren. While it is never enjoyable to be persecuted from any source, it is not difficult to understand why various forces in the world hate us. In fact, such is to be expected because of the diametrical contradiction between their values and our morals. However, it is especially painful when those who are doing their very best to be faithful to the Lord in every way are made to suffer **by the very ones who should be applauding and encouraging them**. Elders have been ostracized and hounded from office because they dared to be true to God and His Word, standing against any departure from the Truth in doctrine or practice.

Alas, many (if not most) Gospel preachers who have preached very long can testify that Satan does not release his hold on the elect (including elders of the church) without a fight – and far too he often wins in this struggle. Many preachers (and their families) have been shamefully treated by elders and other members of the church. Often elders are more attentive to one or two loud-mouthed members who complain against the man who faithfully lives and preaches the Truth than they are to the Truth itself. If the complainers happen to have deep pockets, they may get special attention.

As sad as it is to say, it needs to be said: When otherwise “doctrinally sound” brethren (including elders) decide they do not “like” a preacher (usually it is the Gospel Truth they do not like), they have proved themselves capable of totally forgetting the most elementary principles of Biblical behavior. The “Golden Rule” seems to be utterly foreign to their memories.

Such brethren will treat a brother (often a devout servant of God) and his family in ways that they would not for one moment tolerate being treated in their own work (including the breaking of promises and/or contracts, lying to him and to others about him, causing serious financial hardships, et al.). Even worse, they have been known to treat a brother in Christ with much less consideration than an Atheist would treat his employees. All such forms of oppression produce intense emotional suffering, sometimes coupled with serious financial loss as well.

None of the above should be taken as an excuse for misbehavior by any preacher who refuses to preach or live by the Truth. Such unworthy men place all faithful preachers under a cloud of suspicion in the minds of uncritical thinkers. However, regardless of how unChristian a preacher might be, this fact does not exempt elders and other brethren from their obligation to behave as Christians.

Apparently, Paul was acquainted with some such experiences, which he described as “perils among false brethren” (2 Cor. 11:26). He knew the agony of having a friend and brother forsake him in an hour of severe need and trial (2 Tim. 4:10). Almost any man who has faithfully preached the Gospel over a period of several years could “write a book” about persecution from his own carnally minded brethren.

There is a sense in which God may be said to be the source of our testing and proving through trials and persecution. He **allowed** Job to be severely tried through persecution (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-8). God “chastens” His children through trial, affliction, and persecution, which He allows them to undergo in order to strengthen their character (Heb. 12:4-11). He “proved” and “tried” Abraham in commanding him to offer Isaac as a burnt offering (Gen. 22:1-2; Heb. 11:17 [*peirazamenos*]). However, in none of the trials and tests which God allows does He ever attempt to entice man to sin (Jam. 1:13).

### **Our Reaction to Persecution**

When we are persecuted, or we expect to be persecuted, how are we to deal with it? We can learn from the manner in which others have reacted to persecution. The Lord was persecuted almost daily while He did His work on earth, yet He never let the incessant opposition deter Him from His work. When He suffered every form of indignity and ignominy in His trials and when His tormentors then cruelly and unjustly nailed Him to a cross, He meekly submitted, although He could have destroyed them all by calling upon the angelic hosts (Mat. 26:53). When the apostles were arrested in Jerusalem, they were beaten and warned not to preach the doctrine of Christ any further (Acts 5:40). Upon their release they departed,

“rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name,” and they promptly resumed preaching Christ to the people (vv. 41–42).

On the second great evangelistic thrust led by Paul, he and Silas were beaten, imprisoned, and fastened in stocks in Philippi, in response to which they prayed and sang hymns (16:22–25). Paul had suffered some great loss (perhaps family and career, certainly friends and reputation among the Jewish rulers) in becoming a Christian, but he considered all of these expendable in exchange for Christ (Phi. 3:7–8). Although Paul was a prisoner in Rome at the time he wrote to the Philippians, he could still “rejoice in the Lord greatly” (4:10). From the same imprisonment Paul told the Colossians, “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and fill up on my part that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh...” (Col. 1:24).

Paul, along with the apostles in Jerusalem, were living examples of the exhortation of Peter: “But inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings, rejoice” (1 Pet. 4:13). James echoed the same message: “Count it all joy, my brethren, when ye fall into manifold temptations...” (Jam. 1:2).

No cowardice or intimidation is seen in these men when persecution – even the threat of death – was heaped upon them. The threats and beating the apostles suffered at the hands of the council in Jerusalem actually caused them to preach more boldly (Acts 4:17–21, 23–31; 5:40–42). When Paul was stoned almost to death in Lystra and dragged out of the city, instead of slinking away to Derbe under cover of darkness, he arose, went back into Lystra where he had just been brutally assaulted by a mob, waiting till the next day to depart (14:19–20). Rather than cowering in silent terror upon being arrested, having their clothes stripped off, being beaten with rods, placed in maximum security, and fastened in stocks, Paul and Silas openly prayed and sang hymns in the Philippian jail (16:22–25).

It is also notable that none of the above ever sought personal revenge against those who mistreated them. The Lord lived and died by His own doctrine: “Love your enemies and pray for them that persecute you” (Mat. 5:44). Among His words uttered from the cross was the prayer for His murderers, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Stephen followed both the teaching and the example of His Lord as wicked men hurled killer stones against his unprotected head and body. As his life was slipping away, he prayed, “Lay not this sin to their charge” (Acts 7:60). In light of Jesus’ teaching and example and of his own teaching against personal vengeance (Rom. 12:17–19), it is likely that the prayers of Paul and Silas in the prison at Philippi included blessings upon their tormentors.

In summary, none of these men soaked themselves with tears of self-pity (“Why me, Lord?”), but accepted their mistreatment with a meek and unvengeful spirit. Rather than being intimidated and silenced, their sufferings moved them to bolder action. The reactions to persecution on the part of these great men serve as a model for all who are oppressed by ungodly people, whatever form of persecution one may suffer and from whatever source it may come.

### **Persecution Is Normal**

We should remember that persecution of the righteous by the wicked is “normal.” Wicked and godless people (whether in the world or in the church) do not appreciate being rebuked and held accountable to an inflexible standard. Righteous living is “strange” to them, and when we refuse to participate in their ungodliness and cry out against it, they speak evil of us (1 Pet. 4:4). This fact being so, we should not consider it to be a strange occurrence when we are made to undergo fiery trials (v. 12). God’s faithful people represent His standard by the very lives we live—as well as by the message we speak—which is the reason Paul said that the Lord’s **godly** people can expect to be persecuted. Remember, persecution of the righteous is normal. (If we are never made to suffer for the Lord’s sake, it may suggest that we are not living a godly life or that we are “closet” Christians, hiding our light from the world.)

### **We Are Not too “Good” To Be Persecuted**

We should not count ourselves too “good” or too “honorable” to suffer persecution. Our Lord, the only perfect human specimen and the most honorable of all, was not too “good” to suffer for Truth and righteousness. As earlier quoted, He said, “A servant is not greater than his lord. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). As Christ left the example of suffering for us, even so should we be willing to suffer for Him (1 Pet. 2:21), and as we are persecuted, we are to rejoice that we “are partakers of Christ’s sufferings” (4:13). The attitude Peter enjoined in this passage is exactly that which he and his fellow-apostles evinced when the Jewish council forbade them to preach any more in Jerusalem and had them beaten: they rejoiced “that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name” (Acts 5:41). Paul tried to help the Philippian saints to view their sufferings in the proper light: “To you it hath been granted in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer in his behalf” (Phi. 1:29). Ironically, the more righteous one is, the more persecution (generally) he may expect to receive.

## Persecution Should Be a Source of Joy

Peter's admonition to the brethren who were undergoing a "fiery trial" was to "rejoice" because to be reproached for the name of Christ was a source of blessing or happiness (1 Pet. 4:12-14). James likewise tells us to "count it all joy" when we suffer trials (Jam. 1:2). Admittedly, this injunction may seem most difficult, even impossible, to obey at first reading. However, these inspired men are not urging the aberrant philosophy of masochism in which one derives pleasure from pain: "All chastening seemeth for the present to be not joyous but grievous" (Heb. 12:11). A closer reading of the passage reveals that the source of the joy is not the suffering, opposition, and pain themselves, but rather (1) the recognition of the opportunity for spiritual growth and maturity and (2) the anticipation of the eternal reward for successfully passing the test.

Concerning the first source of our joy mentioned above, notice the way James moves from citing the joy we should have in trials to stating **why** we should rejoice in them: "knowing that the proving of your faith worketh patience. and let patience have its perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, lacking in nothing" (Jam. 1:3-4; cf. Heb. 12:11b). Paul elaborates even further on this principle: "We also rejoice in our tribulations: knowing that tribulation worketh stedfastness; and stedfastness, approvedness; and approvedness, hope" (Rom. 5:3-4). Peter states a similar idea, comparing the Christian's faith to gold, that when tested by trial of fire, may be refined to produce praise, glory, and honor to Christ (1 Pet. 1:7).

Those who have emerged as stalwart defenders and promoters of the Truth in any generation have not done so accidentally or miraculously. Their faith, steadfastness, convictions, and courage were forged in the furnace of trial and testing, often involving painful persecution and overt opposition. The testing and opposition are painful and traumatic at the time, but once we have survived them, our faith is stronger, our determination to serve the Lord more intense, and our longing for Heaven deeper. With the perspective of the passing of some years, one looks back at earlier trials and sees that, when successfully met, they were the preparation ground for facing even worse foes and greater challenges. Young Gospel preachers should especially give attention to this principle. Knowing that even persecution is an opportunity for spiritual growth, let us rejoice in this fact.

But we should also rejoice in trials and persecution in view of the eternal rewards for the victors. Only through the tests and trials that God allows His people to experience can He (and

we) know that we are fully devoted to Him. Anyone can give lip service to believing in God and His Word when the skies are blue, and the sun is bright. The true servants of God are revealed when the storms of reproach, ridicule, humiliation, character assassination, loss of income, rejection, or even physical assault come because one dares to be true to Christ.

“Rejoicing” and “persecution” are made companions in the Lord’s commentary on His “Persecution Beatitude”: “Rejoice [upon being persecuted] and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven...” (Mat. 5:12). The motivation of the reward that awaited the Christ produced in Him joy and the strength to endure the ordeal of the cross: “For the joy that was set before him [he] endured the cross, despising shame, and hath sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2).

Those who are faithful under fire can rejoice, knowing that “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to usward” (Rom. 8:18). Coming from Paul, who knew fully what it meant to suffer for Christ, these words take on even greater meaning. But he says more: “For our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:17).

### **Persecution and Prayer**

As Jesus faced the terrible ordeals of His trials and crucifixion – ultimate persecution – He prayed His blood-sweating prayers in Gethsemane (Luke 22:44). During the dire agony of the crucifixion, the Lord made seven statements, three of which were prayers (Mat. 27:46; Luke 23:34; 46). Stephen prayed as the life was being crushed from his body by those who stoned him to death (Acts 7:59–60). When Paul and Silas were stripped, beaten, and placed in the stocks of the inner prison in Philippi, they prayed and sang hymns (16:23–25). The lesson should be obvious – prayer is a particularly appropriate response to persecution. Such prayers should include petitions for our persecutors, beseeching God for strength equal to our sufferings, and praise and thanksgivings to God. The hymn-writer certainly wrote from a Scriptural perspective when he penned the following verse:

When sore trials came upon you,  
Did you think to pray?  
When your soul was bowed in sorrow,  
Balm of Gilead did you borrow at the gates of day?  
Oh, how praying rests the weary,  
Prayer can change the night to day.  
So when life seems dark and dreary,  
Don’t forget to pray.

## Endurance Without Fear

The Bible provides some explicit instruction concerning our reaction to persecution. When the Lord warned the newly-appointed apostles of the rigorous persecution they would face, He stated some principles that all who are pressed by evil foes do well to hear:

- **First**, we are to be faithful to our Savior regardless of the pressure: “And ye shall be hated of all men for my name’s sake: but he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved” (Mat. 10:22). Here we learn that we should react to oppression with unbending endurance. This same dictum is repeated in the Lord’s letter to the church at Smyrna: “Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days. Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10). These brethren were urged to die rather than deny the Lord. Although not in the context of persecution, Paul echoed this same idea: “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).
- **Second**, we are to face persecution without fear of what cruel and wicked men may do to us: “Fear them not therefore.... And be not afraid of them that kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.... Fear not therefore” (Mat. 10:26–31). Our attitude should be, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear: What shall man do unto me?” (Heb. 13:6b). The Lord prefaced His warning to the church at Smyrna of impending suffering with the admonition, “Fear not the things which thou art about to suffer” (Rev. 2:10a). Paul received such opposition in Corinth that he was caused to be “...in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling” (1 Cor. 2:3). The Lord encouraged him by telling him in a vision at night, “Be not afraid, but speak and hold not thy peace” (Acts 18:9).

Note that Paul admits to reacting with fear in the face of persecution in Corinth. The fact that the Lord tells us repeatedly not to be afraid at the prospect of bodily harm actually implies that He understands that this is a normal initial reaction. It would seem therefore that the Lord is not so much forbidding any element of fear whatsoever as we face the foes of righteousness, as He is cautioning us against allowing the fear that we feel to deter us from our faithful service to Him. It is disturbing to contemplate how many elders, fearful of much less severe personal consequences than bodily harm, have allowed false and sinful elements to corrupt the

congregation they oversee. Many preachers will have much for which to answer at the Judgment because their voices were muted against a particular sin and/or doctrine, or they joined forces with apostates for fear of losing their positions. And how many times have various Christians failed to stand up for the Lord and His Truth (concerning both doctrine and morals), for fear of ridicule, reproach, or being shunned? If the Lord would tell us not to allow fear to cause us to compromise, even when bodily harm or death might be eminent due to our loyalty to Christ, He most certainly would do so when the danger level is far lower.

The instructions of the Lord and the reactions of the faithful ones of bygone days when their faith was severely tested should provide strengthening information for all who are facing and/enduring persecution.

### **Conclusion**

It is a part of the very warp and woof of life for every human being that trials and sufferings will come—for the Christian even more so than others. Satan cannot stand to see men “delivered...out of the power of darkness and translated...into the kingdom of the Son of his love” (Col. 1:13). Accordingly, he will use all sorts of trial, persecution, challenge, and opposition against the elect to affect his abandonment of the Lord. Let us determine that we will be faithful to Him regardless of the cost, remembering all that He suffered for our sakes. If we deny Him, He will deny us before the Father, yielding a sentence of eternal doom in Hell (Mat. 10:33). However, if, when the fires of persecution are heaped upon us, we confess Him, He will confess us, assuring us our place of eternal bliss in Heaven (v. 32).

Paul, who suffered immensely, and likely was slain for the sake of Truth and righteousness, reminds us that whatever we suffer, it will be worth the price to receive the reward:

For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us-ward (Rom. 8:18).

For our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal (2 Cor. 4:17-18).

For I am already being offered, and the time of my departure is come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day; and not to me only, but also to all them that have loved his appearing (2 Tim. 4:6-8).

A repetition of the Lord's promise to the beleaguered saints at Smyrna constitute an appropriate closing encouragement to all who are persecuted for His sake: "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10).

### Endnotes

1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
2. Portions of this chapter were originally published as "Tests in James 1," *Meeting the Challenging Tests of Life*, ed. Jackie Stearsman (Lakeland, FL: Florida School of Preaching, 1998).
3. W.E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co, 1966 reprint), s.v., "tempt," 4:116.
4. *Ibid.*, 4:117.
5. *Ibid.*, s.v., "approved, approved," 1:71; "proof," 3:220.
6. The following note is germane: James 1:2 in the ASV has *manifold temptations* with a footnote on *temptations* suggesting *trials* as an alternate reading. However, the ASV in 1 Pet. 1:6 has *manifold trials* with a footnote on *trials* suggesting *temptations* as an alternate. The phrases in the two passages are identical in the Greek (*peirasmois poikilois*). It is unfortunate that the translators failed to notice their inconsistency. How helpful to the understanding of James 1 it would have been had they rendered verses 2 and 12 as "trials" and "trial," respectively, thus helping distinguish the subject matter of these verses from that of verses 13–15, where temptation in the sense of enticement is actually discussed.

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