

# Christians and Persecution

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Persecution of godliness is becoming increasingly common in our nation, even though, ironically, America was founded by men who believed in God and in the Bible. Also, ironically, many of the earliest colonists fled from Europe to our shores to escape religious persecution.

## The Fact of Persecution

A wicked world will always see to it that those who are determined to live as God directs will suffer for it. Persecution of the righteous began in the shadow of Eden when Cain murdered Abel (Gen. 4:3–8); it continued through Old Testament history. God's prophets were treated in brutal and shameful ways as they fulfilled their God-given tasks, including...

...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 frequently acknowledged the mistreatment of God's prophets (Mat. 5:12b; 23:29–34; et al.). He knew what the wicked Jews would do to Him and to His apostles: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her!" (v. 37a).

The final beatitude of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount concerns 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 considerable commentary (vv. 11–12). Surely, this fact signals the Lord's recognition of the great danger persecution would hold for His people. Just after Peter's confession of His Deity near Caesarea, the Christ 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 "cross" each disciple must bear (daily, if necessary) is suffering because of faithfulness to Him — persecution (vv. 21–22, 24–26).

The Lord plainly and repeatedly warned the apostles of what they would suffer: "And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake" (Mat. 10:22a; cf. Luke 21:12; John 15:20–21). They very soon saw the Lord's warnings fulfilled as they variously suffered arrest, court trials, extended imprisonments, beatings, stonings, mob violence, being chased from town to town,

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.).

After Pentecost, the blood of martyrdom soon fertilized the seed of the kingdom as wicked men murdered Stephen (Acts 7:54-60). This atrocity launched a wave of stringent, organized opposition by Jewish officials to the church in Jerusalem under Saul's relentless leadership (8:1-3; 9:1-2).

So it went with the saints in Philippi (Phi. 1:29-30), Thessalonica (1 The. 1:6; 2:14; 3:3-4; 2 The. 1:4-7), Galatia (Gal. 3:4), and other areas (Heb. 10:32-34). John wrote his Revelation against a backdrop of almost inconceivable atrocities against the saints (Rev. 1:9; 2:9-10, 13; 6:9-11; et al.). To the Lord's warnings, Paul added his inspired promise that reaches down to us: "Yea, and all that would live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12).

### **The Varieties of Persecution**

Persecution may be emotional (loss of friends or family, vilification, ridicule, humiliation, threat, ominous phone calls or letters [sometimes anonymous]), economic (loss of job or promotion, destruction of property), or actual bodily harm. In some areas of the world today (e.g., Communist China, some Muslim nations) organized official oppression (sometimes violent) of Christians and the Gospel still prevails.

The philosophies of Hedonism, Humanism, Atheism, and Liberalism (political, theological, and moral) and the climate for persecution of Christianity (in its broadest sense) have increased in parallels in recent years. We are rapidly reaching the point where U.S. citizens are free to advocate any sort of off-the-wall religion or moral perversion as long as these do not relate to the Bible. It is not alarmism to observe that if current trends are not reversed, our children or grandchildren may one day face government-sponsored testing of their faith. Government regulations are already in place that some judges have applied to limit the discussion of the Gospel with one's co-workers on the job and to proscribe private religious meetings in homes.

Restrictions in public schools pertaining to anything related to the Bible are well known (although expression of witchcraft, pagan mysticism, Islam, "Native American" religion, et al., are allowed and/or encouraged). "Politically correct" speech and thinking are simply tools of intimidation and censorship with a decidedly anti-Bible and anti-Christian bent. For the most

part, the public education hierarchy, up through university level, consists of radical political extremists who despise rationality, reject all absolutes, and exalt subjectivism.

When fellow-citizens count it more reprehensible to display posters showing the graphic **results** of the abortion industry than to **practice** the murderous act itself, our nation is in trouble. When most 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 Biblical morality is manifest. It does not require Solomonic wisdom to forecast conditions if the militant homosexual and feminist forces continue to gain power through the courts. Christians may eventually face rulings and/or laws ordering congregations to install such hedonists as preachers, elders, deacons, and teachers or face crippling fines, property seizure, and imprisonment.

### **Sources of Persecution**

The forces indicated above (i.e., government, employers, teachers, et al.) can bring tremendous emotional and economic pressure upon those under their authority, even without legislative authority to do so. Jesus warned that 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" (Mat. 10:21, cf. 34-37).

Perhaps one of the most insidious and painful sources of oppression and suffering for righteousness' sake is that which one's brethren inflict. We should expect various forces in the world to hate us and seek our harm because of the diametrical contradiction between their values and ours. It is especially painful, however, when the very ones who should be encouraging faithfulness become our persecutors. Elders have been ostracized and hounded from office because they dared to be true to God and His Word. Faithful Gospel preachers who have preached very long can testify that one's brethren (including elders) are often his greatest persecutors. Many preachers (and their families) have been shamefully treated by brethren. Often elders are more attentive to one or two loud-mouthed complainers than they are to the man who faithfully lives and preaches the Truth (especially if the complainers have deep pockets).

It needs to be said: When otherwise "doctrinally sound" brethren (including elders) decide they do not "like" a preacher (often it is the Gospel Truth they or some of the members

do not like), they sometimes prove themselves capable of totally forgetting the most elementary principles of Biblical behavior and ethics. 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 places of work (including breaking promises and/or contracts, lying to him and to others about him, causing serious financial hardships, etc.). Something is terribly wrong when brethren treat Gospel preachers with less consideration than an Atheist treats his employees.

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 seasoned Gospel preacher could “write a book” about persecution from his own carnally minded brethren. None of the above is any excuse for misbehavior in 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.

### **Our Reaction to Persecution**

When persecution comes, how should we deal with it? Several principles in the Bible provide answers.

#### ***The Way Godly People Have Reacted***

The Lord was persecuted almost daily, yet He never let the incessant opposition deter Him from His work. When He was subjected to every form of indignity and ignominy in His trials and was then cruelly and unjustly nailed to a cross by His tormentors, He meekly submitted, although He could have destroyed them all (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.” They promptly resumed preaching Christ to the people (vv. 41–42).

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 (Acts 16:22–25). Paul had suffered 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 order to gain Christ (Phi.

3:7-8). Although a prisoner in Rome at the time he wrote to the Philippians, Paul could still “rejoice in the Lord greatly” (4:10). From the same imprisonment, Paul wrote, “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). None of the above ever sought personal revenge against their persecutors. 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 were those of His prayer for His murderers, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Stephen followed both the Lord’s teaching and example as wicked men stoned the life out of his body. He prayed, “Lay not this sin to their charge” (Acts 7:60).

None of these men soaked their clothes with tears of self-pity (“Why me, Lord?”), but accepted unjust mistreatment with a meek and unvengeful spirit. Rather than being intimidated and silenced, their sufferings moved them to greater boldness. The reactions to persecution on the part of these great men serve as models for all who are oppressed by ungodly people.

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

Our Lord, the only perfect human specimen, 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 when persecuted, we are to rejoice that we “are partakers of Christ’s sufferings” (4:13). Paul tried to help the Philippian saints view their sufferings properly: “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).

### ***Joy in Persecution***

Peter’s admonition to the brethren who were undergoing a “fiery trial” was to “rejoice”; to be reproached for the name of Christ was a source of blessing (1 Pet. 4:12-14). We are to “count it all joy” when we suffer trials (Jam. 1:2). 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 passages reveals that the joy springs not from the suffering, opposition, and pain themselves, but rather from the (1) recognition of the opportunity for spiritual growth and maturity (Rom. 5:3-4; Jam. 1:3-4) and (2) anticipation of the eternal reward for successfully passing the test (1 Pet. 1:7).

Those who are stalwart defenders and promoters of the Truth in any generation have not become such accidentally or miraculously. Their steadfastness and courage were forged in the furnace of trial and testing, often involving painful persecution. Trials are traumatic at the time, but once one has survived them, his faith is stronger, his determination to serve the Lord more intense, and his longing for Heaven deeper. With the perspective of hindsight, one views trials overcome and sees them as preparation for facing stronger foes and greater challenges. Young Gospel preachers should especially give heed to this principle. Knowing that even persecution is an opportunity for spiritual growth, let us rejoice in it.

Those who are faithful under fire can also rejoice, realizing 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). Coming from Paul, who knew fully the meaning of suffering for Christ, these words have even greater force. He continues: “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, He prayed His blood-sweating prayers in Gethsemane (Luke 22:44). During the dire agony of the crucifixion, He made seven statements, three of which were prayers (Mat. 27:46; Luke 23:34, 46). Stephen prayed as his persecutors killed him (Acts 7:59). 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). Prayer is a particularly appropriate response to persecution.

### ***Endurance Without Fear***

**First**, we are to endure faithfully 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; cf. Rev. 2:10).

**Second**, we are to endure persecution without fear: “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). That the Lord tells us not to be afraid at the prospect of bodily harm implies that this is a normal reaction. It would seem therefore that He is not so much forbidding all fear, as He is cautioning us against allowing fear to deter us from faithfulness.

Many elders, fearful of much less severe personal consequences than bodily harm, have allowed false and sinful elements to corrupt the respective congregations they oversee. Many

preachers will have much for which to answer at The Judgment because they were mute in the face of sin and false doctrine, or they joined forces with weak and/or apostate brethren to keep their positions. Many other saints have failed to stand up for the Lord and His Truth for fear of ridicule, reproach, or being shunned. The instructions and examples of the Lord and of other faithful ones of bygone days when their faith was severely tested provide strengthening information for all in facing persecution.

### **Conclusion**

Anyone can give lip service to faithfulness when the skies are blue, the sun is bright, and the wind is at one's back. The storms of reproach, ridicule, humiliation, character assassination, loss of income, rejection, or even physical assault separate the true servants of God from mere pretenders.

Satan cannot stand to see one "delivered...out of the power of darkness and translated...into the kingdom of the Son of his love" (Col. 1:13). Accordingly, he will arouse every possible sort of trial, persecution, test, challenge, and opposition against the elect. Let us determine to be faithful to the Lord regardless of the cost, remembering all that He suffered for our sakes. If we deny Him, He will deny us before the Father, rendering a sentence of eternal doom in Hell (Mat. 10:33). However, if, we confess Him when we are persecuted, He will confess us, assuring us our place of eternal bliss in Heaven (v. 32).

[NOTE: This MS was written to serve as the "Editorial Perspective" for the August 2005 edition of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*. Before its publication, Dave Watson, my Associate Editor, and I resigned our editorial posts under pressure, so it was never published.]

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