

What Does It Mean To Be A Christian?

A Christian Is A Persecuted Life



Discovering God's Word

Bible Study Series

A Christian Is A Persecuted Life

Learn about persecution, why Christians should be expected to experience persecution, and how Christians should respond when they are persecuted

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Discovering God's Word Bible Study Series

Study Number: DGW112

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My plea: It is my hope and prayer that you are searching for the truth that is contained in God's word, the Bible. My desire is to help you understand and obey these truths God has revealed in the pages of His word. It is to that end that I write this material. Please observe all of the Scripture references and evaluate whether the conclusions I have drawn are in harmony with God's word. If they are, I ask that you make honest application of those truths to your life and obey God's instructions.

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What Does It Mean To Be A Christian?

A Christian's Life Is A Persecuted Life

What does it mean to be a Christian? Being a Christian means a great deal. Fortunately, God has given us all the information we need to know about what being a Christian really means. As we study His saving message, we discover that a Christian's life is a persecuted life.

What Is Persecution?

To “persecute” someone is to harass or punish someone with the desire to harm that person – particularly due to some belief that individual holds. Persecution is particularly applicable to the suffering experienced by individuals as a result of their religious beliefs. Therefore, it should come as no surprise to discover that God's people were persecuted throughout the Bible – and God promises that His people will continue to experience persecution.

Varying degrees of persecution

Let's be clear that persecution can take many different forms. There are many ways that individuals have expressed and continue to express hostility toward those who are God's people. Yes, sometimes this hostility is so severe that it results in violent attempts to kill or injure being made against God's people. However, this hostility can also be

manifested through much lighter forms of persecution. Some are slandered. Some are mistreated by their employers. Some are given greater burdens by their family members. Some are mocked and publicly ridiculed. Some are treated unfairly by earthly governments. Some are caused financial burdens. There are many degrees of persecution. But, the common denominator is that these individuals are unjustly made to suffer in some way.

In addition to the different forms persecution takes, you should also understand that persecution varies in intensity in different times and places. For instance, beginning in the mid-to-late first century, Christians experienced severe and often widespread persecution under the Roman Empire. Yet, there were other times when persecution was less severe in some places. The same remains true today. Not every Christian will have threats made against his/her life in every place around this world (at least not most of the time). Yet, just because Christians all around the globe are not threatened by that kind of severe persecution doesn't mean all Christians will not be persecuted.

Examples of persecution in the Old Testament

As we think about persecution, I believe that viewing some Biblical examples of persecution will prove beneficial. Not only will these help us understand the nature of persecution, but they will also serve as an encouragement to recognize that there have been others who have faithfully endured various degrees of persecution in order to follow God.

(1) Abel. Adam and Eve bore Cain and Abel. Abel was a “keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground.” “And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell” (Genesis 4:2-5). Later, Cain demonstrated his hatred and hostility toward his brother by killing him (Genesis 4:6-8). 1 John 3:12 asks, “And why did [Cain] murder [Abel]? Because

[Cain's] works were evil and his brother's righteous." This fits the definition of persecution. Because of Abel's diligence in offering a sacrifice that God would be pleased with (coupled with Cain's own wickedness), Cain became angry at Abel – and demonstrated his hostility through murder.

(2) Joseph. After Joseph arrived in Egypt (having been sold by his brothers into slavery), Joseph was made head over Potiphar's house. During his time serving in this capacity, Potiphar's wife "cast longing eyes on Joseph" and wanted him to lie with her and commit adultery (Genesis 39:7). However, Joseph refused. Again and again, he refused. Finally, Potiphar's wife grabbed Joseph by his garment and again tried to get Joseph to commit adultery with her. Yet, Joseph fled from her – leaving the garment in her hand. After this, Potiphar's wife called for the men of her house and told them that *Joseph* had tried to force himself upon *her* – and fled when she cried out for help. As she repeated this same story to Potiphar, he believed the words of his wife and had Joseph put into prison. Thus, Genesis 39 records the persecution of Joseph. Joseph was committed to being righteous. However, the hostile actions of a wicked individual resulted in suffering (at least temporarily) for Joseph.

(3) Zechariah. 2 Chronicles 24:15-19 records the rebellion of Judah against the ways of God. The people left their service to God in order to serve idols. Consequently, God sent prophets to them in order to bring them back to Him, but they would not listen. "Then the Spirit of God came upon Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest, who stood above the people, and said to them, 'Thus says God: "Why do you transgress the commandments of the Lord, so that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken the Lord, He also has forsaken you.'" So they conspired against him, and at the command of the king they stoned him with stones in the court of the house of the Lord" (2 Chronicles 24:20-21). This man faithfully proclaimed the ways of God – and experienced the hostility of wicked people as the result.

(4) Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. In Daniel 3, the king of Babylon (Nebuchadnezzar) had a golden image erected and commanded that all the people fall down and worship it whenever they

heard the instruments be played. However, when the music was played, some people noticed and reported to the king that some of the Jews (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego) refused to worship the image. The punishment for this defiance of the king's command was to be cast into the burning fiery furnace. And, when the king was enraged against them, he had the furnace heated seven times more than usual – and they were cast into it. Though the text goes on to describe their miraculous survival, it again illustrates how God's people have endured hostility from wicked people.

Examples of persecution in the New Testament

Although there are certainly other Old Testament examples of persecution that could be given, let's spend a few moments considering some examples of persecution in the New Testament. Once again, through these examples we can both learn about persecution and be encouraged to faithfully endure it.

(1) Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate example of persecution. Certainly, He had done nothing wrong. Yet, He suffered at the hands of evil men whenever He was committed to accomplishing the will of the Father. At the conclusion of each of the four gospel records, Jesus is seen as being betrayed, arrested, given unfair trials, mocked, spat upon, scourged (a severe beating), and crucified. Why did Jesus experience this persecution? Because He was not of the world (John 15:18-19). Jesus further explains in John 3:19-20. "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed."

(2) Stephen. In Acts 6-7, we read about a Christian named Stephen and his bold stance for truth. In chapter 7, Stephen addressed Jews – and did not withhold the truth that they had rejected the ways of God and murdered the innocent Son of God. When the people heard this, "they were cut to the heart, and gnashed at him with their teeth" (verse 54). Then, they proceeded to cast him out of the city and stone him to death (verses 57-60). Now, Stephen presented

the absolute truth to these individuals. However, because they had no interest in hearing and obeying the truth, they were hostile toward the one who was telling them the message of truth.

(3) Christians persecuted by Saul. Saul was involved in consenting to the death of Stephen. Then, following Stephen's death (in Acts 8-9), "a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles" (Acts 8:1). "As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison" (Acts 8:3). Chapter 9 records Saul "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" and going to the high priest to ask letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus "so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem" (verses 1-2). Also read Acts 26:9-11 to see how Paul described his work. Therefore, Christians were imprisoned, driven away from their houses, likely separated from their families, and even put to death because of the hostility one man had toward them (while believing that he was doing the will of God).

(4) Paul. In Acts 9, this persecutor became a Christian. His name was later changed to Paul and he was appointed by the Lord as an apostle. He faithfully executed his task as an apostle of Christ and preached the gospel throughout much of the world. Read Acts 9-28 to see a description of his work. However, as he went about faithfully proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ and encouraging those who were disciples of Christ, he often experienced persecution. Read 2 Corinthians 11:22-33 and observe the kinds of persecutions he endured. They included imprisonments, threats of death, beatings, a stoning, hunger and thirst, etc.

Who The Bible Says Will Be Persecuted

This is just a sample of persecutions we can read about in the Scriptures. Yet, all of these

examples demonstrate something about who will be persecuted. In all of these examples, we can see that those who are faithful to accomplishing the will of God have experienced persecution. Now, building on these examples, let's observe some direct teachings from the Scriptures concerning who God says will be persecuted.

General expectation for those who follow God

Those who have dedicated their lives to doing the will of God should have an expectation to experience persecution during their lives. Consider Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:10-12. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

In Matthew 5:3-12, Jesus gives a series of statements concerning those who will truly be blessed. In doing so, He makes these statements concerning persecution. First, notice that persecution is something that results in truly being blessed (happy). Then, I want you to focus on the fact that Jesus' statements come as assuring His people that they will experience persecution. Notice that Jesus said, "Blessed are you *when...*" – not *if* (emphasis mine, EK). Jesus knew that those who truly dedicate their lives to following His ways would experience persecution in their lives. It was not a matter of *if*; but *when* it would happen. And, notice that they should rejoice at this persecution – knowing that they are following the examples of the prophets who faithfully followed the ways of God and experienced persecution before them!

Now, who were these people who would experience persecution? Look through the entirety of Jesus' sermon on the mount and notice some things that are said about and to these same people. They are described as: Poor in spirit, meek, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, the light of the world, the ones who do good to others, the ones who pray sincerely, the ones who are focused on storing up treasures in Heaven,

the ones who put God first in their lives, seekers of God, the doers of God's word, etc. *They* would experience persecution. They would truly be persecuted "for righteousness' sake."

Next, consider the things Peter wrote to some Christians in 1 Peter 4:12-16. "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter."

The letter Peter wrote to these Christians clearly indicates that they were experiencing persecution. Though we are not told the specifics of the persecution, understand the significance of Peter's statement in verse 12. They were not to "think it strange" that they were going to experience such a "fiery trial." They needed to recognize (just as all Christians today need to recognize) that persecution should be viewed as a general expectation of those who serve Jesus Christ. In fact, Peter connects their sufferings with the sufferings of Christ in verse 13. They were to view their sufferings as partaking in the sufferings of Jesus Christ.

Those who are not of the world

Those who are Christians today should not think it strange that they are called to suffer at the hands of wicked people – because that is exactly what happened to Jesus! In fact, Jesus promised His followers as much in John 15:18-21. "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all

these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me."

The reason Jesus said He was persecuted is also the reason He says His followers will be persecuted. That is because the world hates those who are not *of* the world. Let's listen to John's description of the difference between the ways of the world and the ways of God in 1 John 2:15-17. "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever."

The world is focused on physical things. Therefore, the world pursues the physical. However, God's people are "not conformed to this world" (Romans 12:2). They have their treasures in Heaven rather than upon this earth (Matthew 6:19-21). What this all means is that the ways most people live (those who live according to the world) are diametrically opposed to the ways God's people live (who are focused on doing the will of God). They do not recognize the same things as truth. They do not value the same things. They do not have the same goals. They do not do the same things in the same ways.

The end result – as Jesus recognized and experienced – is people who are so devoted to the ways of this world that they will harm those who are following the ways of God. This was explained in John 3:19-21. The world (as it participates in sinful things) hates to have its works of evil exposed as being evil. So, rather than changing their evil to pursue the righteousness of God, they will demonstrate hostility toward those who shine God's light on their wicked ways (whether by word or by example)!

Those who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus

Paul summarized these points in a statement to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:12. He said, "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution." This is a simple yet powerful

statement. Let's break this verse down into its various parts.

First, Paul said, "Yes, and..." This is significant because he is connecting this statement about persecution (in verse 12) with what he has already said. Consider verses 10-11. "But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me." Paul speaks about persecutions he experienced in the cities of Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. These are recorded in Acts 13-14. When you read these passages, they demonstrated that Paul experienced persecution and was "expelled" from Antioch. There was a violent attempt made to abuse and stone him in Iconium. Then, he was stoned to the point folks thought he was dead in Lystra. All of this because he stood for the truth and tried to teach the truth to others (thereby exposing the wickedness and error in their lives).

Second, Paul said that "all" of some group will experience this kind of persecution. Therefore, this persecution was not something that would be reserved for the "leaders" of this group. Instead, it was for every single member. For instance, this is exactly what was demonstrated in Acts 8 regarding the persecution Saul had brought on Christians. "Ordinary" Christians were murdered, imprisoned, cast out of their houses, forced to flee, etc. This persecution was not just for the apostles.

Third, the persecution is promised to come on all "those who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus." These are the ones who are devoted to living for God (they *desire* to live in this way). They accept the truths about God, about Jesus Christ, about the eternal reward for faithfulness to Christ, and about the eternal punishment for rebellion against Christ. They stand for what God has commanded of them. They try to live God's commandments in their own lives. And, they try to teach God's holy ways to others.

Fourth, these individuals "will suffer persecution." Just as Jesus promised in Matthew 5 and John 15, there is an assurance of persecution.

Paul does *not* say that persecution is *possible*. He doesn't even say that it is *likely*. He said that it "will" happen!

Is there any reason to believe that these individuals will no longer be persecuted?

As we have been considering these points concerning who will experience persecution, ask yourself: Is there any reason to believe that these individuals will no longer be persecuted? That you (as a Christian) will not be persecuted? Has society (as a whole) become so pure or enlightened that it recognizes the evil of persecuting disciples of Jesus Christ? Does the world no longer hate those who denounce wickedness and determine to live godly in Christ? Do wicked people now like to hear God's people expose their wickedness and call for changes to be made in their lives?

Not only do I not *think* these things are true – I know they are not true. God's word endures forever (1 Peter 1:25). It contains timeless truths. And, as we have seen, this persecution and hatred the world has demonstrated toward God's faithful people has not ever been limited to one period/age. It was seen prior to the Law of Moses, during the time the Law of Moses was in effect, during the time of Christ, and after Christ ascended into Heaven. God's people have endured such persecution from wicked people for thousands of years.

Therefore, the truths that we have been considering continue to be true and applicable. The world still hates those who are dedicated followers of Jesus Christ. The world, therefore, will still demonstrate that hatred toward Jesus' disciples in various ways. Now, as we established at the beginning of the lesson, this persecution can be manifested in various ways and vary in degree. Yet, it is still true that God's people will experience persecution.

Please do not misunderstand the point that is being made in this section. The Scriptures do *not* teach that Christians should go looking for persecution. They should not be trying to incite anger and persecution against them. Instead, I am affirming that persecution is a by-product of living a faithful Christian life. That is, while you are trying to

produce faithfulness to following Jesus Christ in your life, the natural response by those who are focused on doing evil toward you will be to bring some kind of persecution against you.

Why Some Are Not Persecuted

We have just seen assurance from God that those who are dedicated to doing His will, *will* suffer persecution. So, you should evaluate (if you have been a Christian for any length of time) whether you have experienced persecution in your life. But, as some evaluate their lives, they may find that they have never really experienced *persecution* (at least not because of their devotion to Jesus Christ). Why? Let's consider a few reasons why some do not experience this persecution that God says His followers will experience.

Because they are not true followers of Jesus Christ

There are, undoubtedly, some who profess to be "Christians"; yet, they are not true disciples of Jesus Christ. A true disciple of Jesus Christ is someone who is dedicated to learning from Jesus Christ and following His ways. Anywhere. Everywhere. All of the time.

In fact, Jesus spoke of this kind of commitment as a requirement to follow Him. Listen to Luke 9:23-26. "Then He said to them all, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father's, and of the holy angels.'"

This kind of true disciple is devoted to even dying for Jesus Christ! Certainly, then, he/she is devoted to putting Christ above the other physical desires an individual may have. And, he/she is

devoted to accomplishing the good works Jesus requires of those who will follow after Him. In fact, Jesus said (in Luke 14:25-33) that those who do not put following Him above their families, their possessions, and their own lives "cannot" be His disciples!

Yet, there are many people who try to be "fair-weather-followers" of Jesus Christ. Like "fair-weather-fans" of certain sports teams (who will only support their teams by attending the games when the weather is nice), there are many people (who call themselves "Christians") who are only devoted to following Jesus Christ when it is easy or convenient for them to do so. Therefore, they never (or rarely ever) do any of the hard work that would bring about persecution. They won't align themselves with Jesus Christ enough to be ridiculed. They won't teach others they think will be hostile toward them. They don't present enough of a contrast between themselves and the world for folks to notice a clear distinction.

In Luke 22:54, the Bible says that "Peter followed at a distance." This was after Jesus was arrested. Now, I do not know what was running through Peter's mind. But, immediately following this statement, Peter was given the opportunity three times to say whether he had known or been with Jesus. However, he adamantly denied Jesus each of those times. Therefore, I believe that the reference in Luke 22:54 demonstrates a knowledge that he should follow Jesus. But, he did not want to be associated with Him so closely that he would have to suffer.

Does this describe your life? Do you follow Jesus at a distance? If you are trying to follow Him in this way, understand two things. First, Jesus does not approve of your discipleship. Jesus said that the one who is not "with" Him (entirely with Him) is "against" Him (entirely against Him) (see Matthew 12:30). There is no acceptable middle ground for Jesus (see also Revelation 3:14-22). Second, God does not promise persecution to those who "follow" Jesus in this way. Instead, the world will love this kind of undevoted "disciple" of Jesus Christ. However, the world will hate and persecute those who dedicate themselves to the Lord entirely – as seen in the example of the apostle Paul. In Galatians 2:20, he said, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is

no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

Because they live like the world

Let’s go back to John 15 and look at verse 19 again. Jesus, in this verse, identifies something that will help some understand why they are not being persecuted (even though they identify themselves as “Christians”). “If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”

While the world hates those who are not *of* the world (and will persecute them), the world fully embraces (it loves) those who are *of* the world. Therefore, if you do not experience persecution because of your faith, you need to seriously evaluate whether you are any different from the world. According to Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:14-16, those who are dedicated to be His followers should be easily distinguishable from the world. He said they will be like a city that is illuminated on top of a hill that is in plain sight of everyone around. He said they will be like a candle that is set on a candlestick that gives light to all who are in the house. Are you showing this kind of contrast to the sinful ways of this world? Or have you conformed to the ways of the world?

Are you providing a stark contrast to the world in the way you think? Are you devoted to bringing every thought into captivity for the obedience to Christ? Are you valuing the things God wants you to value? Are you meditating on the laws and ways of God? Do you refuse to allow your mind to be filled with envy, greed, or covetousness? Do you refuse to have inappropriate desires for the things of this world? Are you devoted only to thinking on things that are pure?

Are you providing a stark contrast to the world in the way you talk? Are you speaking only the truth? Are you refusing to engage in gossip? Are you devoted to speaking only words that edify others? Are you seasoning every word you speak with the grace of God? Are refusing to utter any

corrupt/useless word? Do you refuse to use God’s name in vain? Do you refuse to use profanity or euphemistic expressions? Do you refuse to involve yourself in any kind of vulgar/inappropriate speech?

Are you providing a stark contrast to the world in the things you do? Are you devoted to doing good for the Lord? Do you take advantage of opportunities to encourage others to follow Christ and warn them about sin? Do you try to use your opportunities to do good to all mankind? Do you demonstrate love and compassion for your fellow man? Are you devoted to only participating in activities that meet God’s approval? Do you continuously work to eliminate every habit that would fail to please God? Do you show faithfulness to God in assembling with the local church? Do you “practice what you preach”?

Does your life reflect Jesus Christ to the world? Or, does your life reflect the world to Jesus Christ? If you are truly devoted to following Jesus Christ, your life will look very different to the world. And, the world will persecute you. However, the world will embrace those who are living according to its ways.

Because they do not take bold stands for the truth

Finally, it is not enough just to believe in or profess to follow Jesus Christ. Instead, God requires those who are true followers of Jesus to boldly stand for His way of truth – even when it is not easy or convenient to do so. This not only involves doing the right things when there are consequences attached with doing them; but it also involves saying the things that need to be said when they need said.

Listen to Paul’s instructions to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2-5. “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.”

Paul encouraged Timothy to be faithful to Christ in preaching God's word. He said that sometimes God's word would be accepted. Sometimes it would be rejected. However, Timothy's responsibility remained the same – "Preach the word!" Clearly, there would be times when Timothy would try to preach God's word (standing boldly for the truth) – and others would not appreciate what he had to say. In fact, the instruction to "endure afflictions" indicates that there would be difficult times that would result from standing for what is right.

Likewise, God requires you to stand boldly for His way of truth – whether the people around you accept that truth or not. God does *not* permit you to change your response to the truth because the people you are around would mock you, slander you, or try to hurt you! In addition, God does not lighten your responsibility to preach His word faithfully to others because they will not accept it. In fact, God wants to use you in these situations to warn those who are rebellious toward Him!

Yet, perhaps you have not been taking these kinds of bold stands for Jesus Christ. Perhaps you are faithful to Christ in your private life. However, when you get around other people who aren't Christians, perhaps you try to blend in with them. Perhaps you hold back from speaking God's message of truth to them. If this is the case, you should not *expect* to be persecuted. But, you should not expect to have God's approval either – because you are refusing to stand for the truth at all times!

A Christian's Response To Persecution

I encourage you to evaluate your life and consider your persecutions. Are you really living a life that is faithful to Jesus Christ? If so, you have been experiencing and will experience persecutions. Therefore, I want to spend the final part of this lesson focusing on how a Christian should view and respond to the persecutions he/she experiences.

Willing to endure persecution

Whenever Jesus spoke concerning the cost of discipleship, He did not try to mislead anyone. He warned that the cost of discipleship is high. In fact, He warned that it costs a person *everything* that pertains to this physical life. Again, Jesus said that His disciples must be *willing* to put Him above their families, their possessions, and their own physical lives (Luke 14:25-27, 33). Jesus said that those who are not willing to do this "cannot" be His disciples.

So, Jesus encouraged those who desire to follow Him to count the cost of discipleship. He wants people to consider whether they are willing to commit themselves to Jesus Christ in this kind of complete way. Certainly, this involves making a determination about whether an individual is willing to endure persecution. Therefore, those who are Christians must be so committed to Jesus Christ that they will faithfully endure persecution. After all, those who are Christians are seeking the same eternal home in Heaven as Christ's faithful martyrs will experience. But, how can you possibly expect to receive the same reward as they – if you are unwilling to commit to the same degree (i.e. a full commitment)?

Faithful endurance

The Christian must not just be willing to endure persecutions; he/she must actually faithfully endure them whenever they come. 1 Peter 4:19 says, "Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator." Listen to what Jesus told some Christians in the city of Smyrna who were about to be severely persecuted: "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death" (Revelation 2:10-11).

What does it mean to faithfully endure persecutions? Think about Jesus. Think about Stephen. Think about the Christians who were

persecuted by Saul. Think about Paul after he became a Christian. They did not turn away from following Jesus in order to avoid the persecutions! They dedicated themselves to following Christ – no matter the cost!

Courageous in Christ

Fear has the potential to make God’s people weak in the face of persecution. Why did Peter deny Jesus? I believe it was because of fear concerning the potential consequences of following Jesus. However, I want you to consider what Jesus taught in Matthew 10 – as you face persecutions in your life. In this chapter, Jesus sent His apostles out to teach the gospel (often referred to as the “Limited Commission”). In sending them out, He warned that some would persecute them. Yet, He said, “Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:27-28).

Jesus wanted His disciples to know – and wants you to know that man can only harm your physical body. They cannot touch your soul. But, God can! So, you need to fear God rather than men. In Romans 8:31-39, Paul demonstrates that nothing and no one is able to separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. Not even the most severe of persecutions! Therefore, you truly can stand courageous in Christ Jesus in the face of any persecution.

Happy to suffer

We often don’t think of suffering as an occasion for rejoicing. Yet, that is exactly how faithful disciples of Jesus Christ viewed persecutions in the New Testament – and how Jesus has told you to respond. Look at Matthew 5:10-12 again. Jesus said, “Blessed [happy] are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake...Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad....” Similarly, Peter told Christians who were being persecuted, “rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His

glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy” (1 Peter 4:13).

But, this is not just the instruction concerning how you must view persecution. There is also an example of the apostles responding in this very way. After being threatened and beaten, the apostles can be seen “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name” (Acts 5:41). When you suffer as a Christian, rejoice that you have been counted worthy to suffer for Jesus Christ (the one who suffered for you)!

Glorifies God

The Christian has committed his/her life entirely to bring glory to God (see 1 Corinthians 6:19-20). You do this whenever you faithfully obey the will of God. For, violating God’s instructions results in falling short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). In Matthew 5:16, Jesus says that those who shine as lights in the world will even cause others to glorify the Father in Heaven.

This is just as true regarding your perseverance in times of persecution as it is at any time. 1 Peter 4:16 says, “Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.” Every way you respond to the persecutions you experience must be focused on how you can bring glory to God – and help others glorify God through your sufferings!

Hopeful concerning the life to come

Ultimately, the Christian endures all of the persecutions he/she experiences because of the tremendous hope that is in Christ Jesus for eternal life in Heaven. Paul said, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18)! Remember that Jesus said you will gain your life if you lose it for His sake; but you will lose it if you desire to save it for yourself (Luke 9:24).

As Paul experienced a great amount and degree of persecution, consider the hope he expressed in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. “Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day

by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

Conclusion

A true disciple of Jesus Christ will experience persecution. This is promised in the Scriptures. Therefore, you must not consider it strange when you experience such things (1 Peter 4:12). Instead of considering it strange to be persecuted, the true follower of Jesus Christ should find it strange if he/she is *not* being persecuted! In Acts 14:22 (after being persecuted in Antioch, Lystra, and Iconium), Paul exhorted Christians to continue in the faith, saying, “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.”

Study Questions

1. What Is Persecution?

Does persecution always come in the same form and the same degree of severity?

List and briefly explain some examples of persecutions in the Old Testament.

List and briefly explain some examples of persecutions in the New Testament.

2. Who The Bible Says Will Be Persecuted

Why should persecution be a general expectation for those who follow God?

Why will those who are not of the world be persecuted?

What does 2 Timothy 3:12 teach concerning those who will be persecuted?

Is there any reason to believe that these individuals will no longer be persecuted?

3. Why Some Are Not Persecuted

Why will those who are not true followers of Jesus Christ *not* be persecuted?

Why will those who live like the world *not* be persecuted?

Why will those who do not take bold stands for the truth *not* be persecuted?

4. A Christian’s Response To Persecution

How much must you be willing to endure for Jesus Christ?

What does it mean to faithfully endure persecutions?

How can you be courageous in Christ Jesus?

Why should you rejoice to suffer for Jesus Christ?

How can you glorify God in persecutions?

Why does the Christian faithfully endure persecution?