

## Persecution

A Reality for Christians

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When I was a boy, both the church in Norwalk, California, and the one in Columbia, South Carolina would occasionally have movie night. (This was before the time of video cassettes. I am at least that old.) I can remember when we had to set up a projector and thread the film through the projector and change the reels when they were done, and the whole nine yards of putting on a movie for a couple hundred people. I bring this up only because in both places, if I recall this correctly, we saw the movie *Quo Vadis*.

I do not know how many of you have seen *Quo Vadis*. I think it came out in about the middle 60s. I am not exactly sure about that. It was one of these epics about the Roman Empire during the time of early Christianity. I hated that movie, and I will tell you why. It was a great movie. I liked to watch it, but it always gave me horrible dreams. The reason was that every once in a while they threw a Christian to the lions, or many Christians to the lions, or they would light them on fire as bonfires or torches to light the night, or, I believe this occurred in the film—Paul was beheaded. I am not exactly sure about that, it might have been later.

I hated this movie so much. I do not know if I ever got through the whole thing, but it did show a lot about Christians being persecuted. I do remember that much. It really made a great impression on my mind, at least the night after we saw it. I hated those dreams. I would wake up very frightened that this could happen to me.

Now this movie taught me something very early in my life, and it has really never left me. The lesson that it taught me is that Christianity is a very serious business. It is a life and death endeavor. Christianity is a lifelong dedication of one's life to God and to the principles of His Word. It should never slack in its devotion to God and to Christ, and it follows the will of God no matter where it leads. If it leads to the guillotine, if it leads to the electric chair, if it leads to the firing squad, if it leads to the cheering crowd watching horrendous beasts rip the flesh from Christians, or if it leads to the fiery stake—there is always the devotion to God. God gives us rapturous joys and blessings unmeasured, but every now and then He asks us to endure horror, and maybe martyrdom in vicious persecution.

Most of us live in America though where religious freedom is guaranteed. Under law, they are not allowed to persecute you here. It is to the point now in America where this guarantee of freedom of religion has become a religion in itself to the point of where they even think of such horrendous things as abortion as a freedom to live their life the way they choose. That is "religion"—living according to a certain value. Abortion is a tenet in the humanist religion.

In America, we have never suffered persecution on a large scale at least. Back in 1979 the church endured a very mild governmental persecution by the state of California by the attorney general's office of that state. I should maybe mention here that that was brought on by a bunch of former members—maybe even people who were considered to be members. So in a way that persecution was not an external persecution. It was an internal persecution, which has been the way that it seems to have been going in the past however many years, that most of our persecutions have come from ourselves.

Like I said, we went through this mild persecution in 1979 by the state of California, but most of us away from Pasadena felt little or nothing of it. Were any of you jailed, beaten? Did any of you lose your salary, your homes? I do not think so. Not from that. Now some of us have had persecutions individually. A few church members have been jailed for "child abuse." All they were doing was spanking their children as God has instructed, and somebody thought that they were being excessive. I believe that there was a case in Alaska where this person was jailed for something along that line. I am not sure. It might have been somewhere else. I seem to recall something like that from my experience in Church Administration about ten years ago.

There have been those kinds of persecution. Some have fought court battles over the Sabbath, or they without any recourse whatsoever just simply lost their jobs and had to find another. That is a form of persecution. Others have had wrenching family problems and divorces, where the religion gets thrown in, and they suffer from that. Some have fought doctors and governments, families and hospitals over the healing doctrine.

Now I am not trying to minimize in any way the uncertainty, the trauma, the hurt, the pain, the loss of income, the loss of respect or standing in the community, and all the turmoil that people have gone through during their Christian lives because of these individual persecutions. Not in any way. Those things were very real and very traumatic to the people who were going through them.

But they had their purpose as well. God was giving them trials for them to grow in character, but they still pale beside some of the feats some of our predecessors in God's church did. They had to suffer as witnesses before the world, and many of them were beaten, stoned, torn by lions, fed to the fires, whatever. They were martyred. May I see a show of hands of those who have given their lives for the gospel? In a way that is a trick question, because when you gave your life to Jesus Christ in baptism, *you gave your life for the gospel*. I want you to hang onto that because it is the underpinning of what I am going to say from here on out.

At this point in the sermon I want to make a distinction and do some definitions, because you may think that these distinctions are rather fine and they do not mean a whole lot, but they may be splitting hairs. But I think once you see these distinctions, it will help you in understanding where I am going. I think that I am on very firm ground when I do this, because the first century apostles did the same thing when they spoke about persecution. What they did, they made a distinction about tribulation and the word *persecution*, so I want to make this very hair-fine distinction so we come at it from the same angle.

The word *tribulation*, most of the time in the Bible, is a translation of the word *thlipsis*. It is also translated *affliction*, *trouble*, and *distress*. The primary meaning of this word is *pressure*, like when you push down on something, like air pressure pushes down on us. Another way of talking about it or defining it is the word *stress*. We all know about stress.

This time of God's plan is the epitome of stress. We call it *the rat race*. In a way these pressures that we go through just in our daily lives can be called *tribulation*. It is really anything that burdens the spirit, or burdens the person so that he cannot, or that he is in a strait place and narrow confine, for he has to choose, one way or the other, and it puts great stress on him. This is the general word that in the church we might even call *a trial*. It is a very general word.

We use the term *trial and tribulations*. That is in a way very similar. There is a difference there, but for this sermon we are not going to be that fine in our distinction. Tribulation means *affliction*,

*trouble, distress*—meaning pressure, or a trial, basically. I also need to add that what causes these tribulations is either external, or internal. You can put stress on yourself because you have to face a decision; or it could be somebody making you make a decision that causes great distress.

The word *persecution* is a different word altogether. It is the word *dioko*. That is the verb form. The noun form is *diogmos*. It is almost invariably—I think that it is only one other time that it is translated into something other than the form of *persecute, persecuting, or persecution*—I think 44 out of 45 times, or something like that, translated as *a form of persecute*. Its basic meaning is *to put to flight, or to pursue*. Now just by these definitions, we can see that its source is always external. It is never something that we generate ourselves. It is something that comes from outside of ourselves—some other person or some other being (and I must put that in there because Satan and the demons persecute, so it is not only men that persecute, but it is also angels, fallen angels that will persecute).

Tribulation is stress or distress, or pressure from either outside or inside, internal or external, and persecution is a pursuit of putting to flight what comes from the outside. Maybe one way to remember this, just very quickly—when we talk about Israel and the Jews we say things like *a Jew is an Israelite, but not all Israelites are Jews*. Well we can do the same thing with *tribulation* and *persecution*. Persecution is tribulation, but not all tribulation is persecution.

Let us go to Matthew 13. We are going to just quickly show where the apostles made this distinction. Here is one where Jesus makes a distinction between them. This is in the explanation of the sower.

**Matthew 13:20-21** But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation [*thlipsis*] and persecution [*diogmos*] arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.

Tribulation is the general word. It can come from either inside or outside of a person. Persecution is external. Somebody is pursuing. Somebody is coming after us and putting us to flight. I also should mention here that Jesus makes a further distinction here in saying *that it is because of the Word*. We can be stupid and bring on persecution for other things, but this is persecution for the Word.

Let us go to Romans 8. In verse 35 we will see where Paul makes this distinction as well.

**Romans 8:35** Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

Nothing should. What he does here is, he takes the word *tribulation*, and he makes that the first one because it is the most general term. Remember it means any kind of distress or pressure that comes upon us. And then he goes and says six more words that are more specific to these kinds of tribulations. The word *distress* here is a separate word, and it really means, difficulty. When we are in difficulty, we are in a strait place. We are between a rock and a hard place. Kind of a "damned if you do, damned if you don't." A *Catch 22* situation where it is tough, it is difficult.

Then you have the word *persecution* [*diogmos*] which we know means, to put to flight. And then we have *famine*, which means lack of food, and *nakedness*, which means either lack of clothing, lack of shelter, or it may mean, when we are being put to shame, or reproached. If you are running outside

naked, are you not ashamed? Do you understand where that comes from? *Peril* is the word we would probably use for danger—just in dangers; and then the sword obviously is *warfare*, or just plain old getting beat up, or knifed, or something along that line—violence.

I think this is pretty clear. We have gotten this distinction down, so we can go on.

Let us go to Hebrews 10 now. We are going to be talking about persecution, not tribulation. We are going to zero in on the specifics—the one that means *to be put to flight*, or *to be pursued* by an external source.

**Hebrews 10:32-34** But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated [after your calling, after your conversion], you endured a great struggle with sufferings: partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations [there is the general word], and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; for you had compassion on me in my chains [Paul was going through persecution], and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods [they were losing their goods and their income], knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven.

These people that Paul was writing to, these Hebrews, had when they were first called, [just after their conversion] gone through some persecution. They had gone through some suffering, and they had been able to understand what Paul was going through in his persecution.

Now let us go to chapter 12 and verse 3. What he is doing here is comparing what we have gone through to what Christ went through.

**Hebrews 12:3** For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.

Obviously these people were going through some mild form of persecution, and Paul was saying, "Well, look what Christ had to go through." And then he says, "You ain't seen nothin' yet."

**Hebrews 12:4** You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin.

So they were at the point in their Christian lives where they had had some bad things happen to them. They had been mildly persecuted in the past, but they had not been persecuted to the point where they had to give their lives, or where they had been beaten—and I think this is where we are. I think that we can identify very well with the whole book of Hebrews, because many of the signs and symptoms that are shown in here fit us very well.

We have had some sore trials. Many of us went through many of these sore trials right after our conversion where we had to explain to people, "Well, we don't keep Sunday, we keep the Sabbath. Well, we don't eat pork. Well, we don't go to the doctors like we used to. We don't do this, we don't do that. We do this, and we look funny I know." But we had to tell people and make a witness before the world that we had gone another way.

We may have even suffered our income stopped because we lost a job. We had to go in and tell the boss, "Look, I can't work the Friday night shift," and he says, "Well tough. You don't come back Monday." That is persecution for righteousness' sake.

I am sure many of us endured the hostility and reproaches of family and friends and neighbors and acquaintances. We could not go to their block parties, we could not go out drinking with them anymore, we could not go out on Friday night anymore. We did not want to go see that particular band anymore. We did not want to do this, we did not want to do that, and we got needled for it, or worse. I do not know how many had eggs thrown at their house because they changed into this weird religion, or what. But many of us suffered those things when we first were enlightened, or illuminated.

*But . . .* There is always a *but*, is there not? We have not yet striven against sin to the point where we have shed our blood. We have yet to endure *anything* near to what Christ endured. And, God-willing, we never will. Now I ask, "Why haven't we?" Some would say, "Why ask why? Let's be happy and be thankful that we haven't had to suffer this persecution." I know we pray every day for God's protection, that He will not allow us to suffer these things. We thank Him for the good times that we have had, and that we have not had a home invasion, or we have not been brought to trial in front of magistrates and kings, prime ministers, rulers, and judges.

But there must be something more to why we have not been persecuted. I think there is, and I say this because it does not make sense that God would be partial to us, and so mean to those first century Christians, and those second century Christians, and those third century Christians, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, who were driven through Europe and other parts of the earth, pounded and persecuted, killed, and let us just waltz right in. God is not a respecter of persons. What makes us so special that we think we can go through our lives without persecution?

One reason I think that we have not had persecution is that we live among physical Israel. The nations of Israel in the main are more tolerant of religious notion than our Gentile nations. Many of the severe and sadistic persecutions have come from Rome—the arch-typical leader of the Gentile world. They are the ones that have had the cruelest, most unusual persecutions in the history of the world. How many millions died in the Inquisition? A lot of those people were not even in the true church. Today, the worst in the world, as far as persecution goes, are the Muslims, who in many cases will not allow any other religion, Christianity or not, enter their borders. We have to be careful about sending tapes and literature to one man who, I believe, is in Malaysia, because if they find out that he is getting Christian material, they could throw him in jail.

The other ones that are bad about this—persecuting people around the world—are the Chinese. Right now there is a very systematic persecution going against Christians in China. We just had a missionary flown back to the United States because he was taken prisoner, jailed by the Chinese. Also the Indonesians and the Vietnamese are high on the persecution lists these days. But they are all Gentile nations. Israelite nations, for better or for worse, are a lot more tolerant.

I do not think that is the overriding reason why we have not been persecuted in these times. Israelites have shown in their history that they have as much, or more animosity and venom in them to persecute God's church, or even people just of a different stripe, as Gentiles do. I do not want to point a finger at the Gentiles. It is just that right now most of the persecution has been coming from Gentile nations. England has a pretty sorry history of persecution during the religious wars, let us call them—Puritans against the Catholics, and others. I do not mean to pick on the English either. The Americans persecuted the Mormons pretty badly here in the United States, and evidently, Martin was telling me just the other day there was a pretty severe persecution in Maryland—Catholics against Protestants.

So Israel is not immune to it, but in these days of humanism and liberalism they have pretty much made it easy for us to practice our religion. But I think there must be at least two other factors that are missing as to why we have not been persecuted, and I will list these. The first one is the '*time factor*.' These are not yet the times for persecution.

Persecution gives us a wonderful opportunity to witness before the world of our faith in God. If we were persecuted or martyred at the wrong time, would that not be a waste of our witness? If God asks us to sacrifice our lives, He is going to make it worth every drop of blood that we have to give. He is not going to waste one of His precious children's lives on a frivolous martyrdom. There is no such thing as a frivolous martyrdom, so there must be a certain time in God's plan when martyrdom, when persecution, is to Him worthwhile. Otherwise He would not allow it. He is not a sadistic God.

Let us go to Luke 21 and we can see some of this. We will start in verse 7. This is Luke's version of the Olivet Prophecy.

**Luke 21:7-13** So they asked Him, saying, "Teacher, but when will these things be? And what sign will there be when these things are about to take place?" And He said: "Take heed that you not be deceived. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He,' and, 'The time has drawn near.' Therefore do not go after them. But when you hear of wars and commotions, do not be terrified; for these things must come to pass first, but the end will not come immediately." Then He said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences and there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven. But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and rulers for My name's sake. But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony."

It will give us an opportunity to witness.

**Luke 21:14-19** "Therefore settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will send some of you to your death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But not a hair of your head shall be lost. In your patience possess your souls."

What Jesus has done here is that He has given us a step-by-step plan, let us say, of how things are going to go from this time that He said this, up until the very end. He said that before any of these great signs happen, there is going to be persecution. "They will deliver you up to the synagogues and put you in prison, and they will kill some of you," He says. In Matthew it might be even more clear to show that these persecutions occur just before the Great Tribulation begins. So if we are correct in our assessment of where we are in God's plan, then these persecutions may begin soon, but they have not really begun yet. Like I said, how many of you have given your life for the gospel of Christ?

Let us go to Revelation 3, in the letter to the Laodicean church.

**Revelation 3:14** "And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, 'These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness.

He is the One that gave the perfect and most faithful and true witness of God's way ever. What He is doing, He is giving Laodiceans a hint of what He would like them to live up to.

**Revelation 3:14-16** 'These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of My mouth."

**Revelation 3:19** "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.

See, He throws them into persecution. He gives them up to tribulation. We know that many of this era will suffer persecution. Those who have this attitude will suffer persecution. They will have to go through great tribulation because they have not changed beforehand. They have not repented. We will see here that one of the reasons that God uses persecution is to shock us into repentance. "You know better, and you haven't done anything till now." Well repent, because of this. In a way it is a last-ditch effort on God's part to get us to repent.

Let us go to Revelation 12. This is the encapsulated history of the church of God.

**Revelation 12:13-16** Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child. But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth.

This is kind of an interesting word, *spew*. It kind of attaches it to Revelation 3. At least it seems to in my mind.

**Revelation 12:17** And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.

I threw this one in there just to show that this is the fate of those who have not repented, and Jesus says He needs to chasten and rebuke, and allow them to show their true colors in persecution, and maybe martyrdom. But this persecution happens at a precise time in history—and we have not hit it yet.

The second factor I have called the '*righteousness factor*.' This is where we are going to stay for the rest of the sermon.

Let us go back a few pages to Revelation 6, and we are going to read about the Fifth Seal.

**Revelation 6:9** When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God . . .

Remember Jesus said in the parable of the sower that these things happened because of *the Word of God*.

**Revelation 6:9-11** . . . and for the testimony [That word keeps popping back up.] which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" And a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer [stay in the grave a little while longer], until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.

That is kind of interesting. Here we have a persecution that comes upon certain people for *righteousness' sake*. These ones are martyred for *the Word of God*—for the witness, for the testimony that they held—and God says that He will avenge them in a little while, but He is waiting because there is a certain number of people He has in mind that will have to be martyred as a witness for Him. That number at this point had not yet been reached, so He said *a little while longer*.

These suffer persecution for their righteousness, because they are worthy. They have proven to God that they are faithful and obedient to Him, and they are killed to furnish a witness against the ungodly. Maybe I could say the ungodly Babylonian system of this world—not just the people, but the whole schmeer. They give a witness of God's way of life before the world. Now, the \$64,000 question. Are we righteous enough to suffer persecution? Tough question, is it not? Are we worthy of the fellowship of the sufferings of our Lord and Savior? Remember that verse? We heard it several times in the last several weeks. Philippians 3:10, "The fellowship of His sufferings."

Have we gone outside the camp to bear His reproach? Hebrews 13:13. Are we righteous enough to be persecuted? It is kind of a funny way to ask that question, because we do not think of it that way. I am not pointing my finger at anybody. I am not trying to judge anybody's righteousness, but I am asking a very serious question, something that we must consider. Have we yet reached the point where we could truly make a fitting witness for God, under persecution? We need to ask ourselves how we measure up. Would we remain faithful, and make a good witness for God? Or would we give in and accept deliverance by apostatizing? That is the question.

Let us go to Hebrews 2. I will give you a warning here. This is my link to my Dad's sermon of a couple of weeks ago that he gave. Much of the theme was about suffering, but he brought it into our priesthood under Jesus Christ.

**Hebrews 2:10** For it was fitting for Him [Jesus Christ] for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the author of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

Remember that word *author*, or *captain* of our salvation in the *King James*? It means *archegos*, meaning *the forerunner*, *the trailblazer*—the one who went ahead so that others may follow. Let us go to I Peter 2.

**I Peter 2:4-5** Coming to Him [Jesus Christ] as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.



That brings up that we are priests under Jesus Christ to perform the same type of job that He does, under Him. Now back to Hebrews 5. Verses 1 and 4 are the qualifications for the high priesthood in the Levitical system.

**Hebrews 5:5-8** So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest [He did not make Himself to become High Priest.], but it was He [God the Father] who said to Him: "You are My Son, today I have begotten You." As He also says in another place: "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek"; who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.

Our High Priest, like it said in chapter 2, verse 10, had to go through sufferings in order to be perfected, to be completed. There were certain things that He had to learn to be a fitting High Priest for us now, and for those later.

**Hebrews 5:9-11** And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him [there is the reward], called by God as High Priest "according to the order of Melchizedek," of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.

That does not sound very good. They should know these things, but they have become dull of hearing. They have lost something.

**Hebrews 5:12-14** For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

**Hebrews 6:1-3** Therefore leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits.

God willing, we will go on to perfection.

Now I have gone through these for a reason, because I think (this is my own opinion), we were at this point just a short time ago, where we needed someone like the apostle Paul to give us a kick in the seat of the pants and say, "Look! You've become babes. You need to learn these things again. We need to explain them again." And we listened. I hope we listened. Many of us went back and we reprove everything, because we had to. We had forgotten all those things, or we ignored them for so long that we were not sharp on them anymore—and all these questions were coming up. "Aren't there really three people in the Godhead?" "Is the Holy Spirit a person?" "Is the gospel just the 'gospel of grace' and has nothing to do with the Kingdom of God?" Scratch, scratch, scratch, scratch.

Let us go back and relearn these things and reprove them to ourselves. "Is faith necessary for healing?" Of course it is. We had to dig through the Bible again and get those verses back in our

heads. We have gone through this point, and now I hope and I pray that once again we are of *a full age*, as Paul says in Hebrews 5:14, i.e., "Those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." We have come hopefully to the place where we really need to be thinking about whether we are righteous enough to suffer persecution.

Now I do not want to judge us and say we are righteous, but I hope we are not babes anymore, and I hope that we are trying to be righteous and that God is saying, "I'm well pleased with them. Maybe now I can give them persecution."

The whole idea of *going on to perfection* we know is summed up in Ephesians 4:13-15. I will just read it to you. "Till we all come to the unity of the faith, and to the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. But speaking the truth in love, that we may grow up in all things unto Him who is the Head [Christ]."

Now, since He was the standard of righteousness and the One to whom we are to look, and the One to whom we are to grow up into—what did He have to face? What happened to Him? Go back to Isaiah 53.

**Isaiah 53:3-4** He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God. . .

Did you notice that—*by God*? Could He have been persecuted for righteousness' sake? I dare say.

**Isaiah 53:4-5** Smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him.

**Isaiah 53:7** He was oppressed and He was afflicted.

Not very pretty, is it? We could go through Psalm 22. We could go through the four different versions of the Gospels of what He went through. That is not very nice; not very fun to go through. He did not have a cushy life, or a cushy death. Persecution is not something one looks forward to, but I think that if we are being righteous, if we are trying to live by every Word of God, we should expect it.

Let us go to II Timothy. We catch a couple of verses here. Paul is speaking to Timothy.

**II Timothy 3:10-12** 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. Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

Why? Let us go down to verse 17. He throws in a scripture here, but it goes just as well with this idea of suffering persecution.

**II Timothy 3:17** That the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Is that not what *being perfected and growing to the stature of Christ* is—going on to perfection, being complete?

**II Thessalonians 1:3-5** We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer.

Paul says here that when we suffer persecution, it is clear, plain as day—proof that God has judged you worthy of His Kingdom, and He has allowed you to suffer for it. It kind of reminds me of something Mr. Tkach, Sr. used to say. It just kind of strikes me. I will tell you now while it is on my mind. He said, "A pat on the back is only about a foot away from a kick in the seat of the pants." But persecution is kind of that way. It is really—if we are being persecuted for righteousness' sake. It is a pat on the back from our God. That is a hard thing, is it not? That is a very big horse pill to swallow.

Truly God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts! This is not how we think. Human nature tries to avoid suffering at all costs. It tries to avoid persecution. But God says that there is a kind of reward for persecution, because of righteousness. It is almost too much to handle. I came across this about a month ago, and I am still reeling from it—from the idea that persecution is a reward for righteousness. I think it is something we have known, but it is hard to talk about, hard to think about, because we all want to be so secure and be at peace, and not to suffer. It gets worse though.

**Philippians 1:27-28** Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition [or destruction], but to you of salvation, and that from God.

See, these being terrified and persecuted is proof of salvation from God, he says.

**Philippians 1:29-30** For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear is in me.

Did you get what he said? "It has been granted on behalf of Christ to **suffer** for His sake." That word *granted* is very interesting. It is the word *charizomai*. It means *to show favor*, or *kindness*. Let us stick that in. "For you, God has shown you favor and kindness on behalf of Christ, to suffer for His sake." This *charizomai* is a cognate word of *charis*. Do you know what that word is? *Grace*. It is part of God's grace, His unmerited gift to you to suffer for His sake. I hate to bring you bad news, but that is what it is. *Suffering persecution* is a *gift of God*. That is basically what I just told you. It is a sign of His favor and kindness toward us. It should blow you away!

Like I said, we do not think this way! Now this is not to say that we should seek it out. I am not saying that at all. I am not saying that we should desire it. I do not want any of us to be the martyr type that wants this to come upon us. That is kind of twisted. See, God is the One who judges whether we are able to take it. We are not supposed to go out there and throw ourselves in front of a firing line. That is bringing persecution on for *stupidity's sake*. There is a big difference. If God allows you to be persecuted, that is good, and that is His gift, and He is showing you kindness and favor; but if you do something that is either sinful or stupid, then you are suffering for the wrong reason, and it is all your fault. God may just allow it to teach you a lesson not to be stupid, or sinful, or for me to be stupid and sinful.

So let us not mix our persecutions here. There is a good persecution, and there is a bad persecution. If we are going to be persecuted, we want the good persecution, because that means God is in control. Remember, when David numbered Israel, God gave him the choice of what kind of persecution he would have. He said, "You can either have the armies come, or this come, and He said *or* I can plague you." And David said, "Please God, plague me, because I know with you there's mercy, but with man I'm never sure." So make sure, if you fall into persecution, it is the right persecution, not the wrong persecution.

**Hebrews 11:32-38** And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness [there is that word], obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again. And others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy.

I should say that we are not worthy of them. I should say they were willing to go through these things. We have not done any of this yet.

**Hebrews 11:38-39** They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise.

They are still waiting for their reward.

I just went through these to show you what kind of persecution is the good kind, when you do it because you through faith subdued kingdoms and worked righteousness. That is the good kind, where they showed a good witness before the world. The good kind leads to obtaining a better resurrection. This does not mean at all, I think, that we go from the second resurrection at the end of the Millennium, to the first resurrection. I do not think it means that at all. Those who are called and converted during this time will be raised in the first resurrection. So what is he taking about? He is saying that they did these things so that they could obtain a better *reward*—that they might be worthy of a higher office and more responsibility in God's Kingdom.

Now the reason I brought this in is because I did not want us to stray from the idea that we are a priesthood under Christ, and that our whole Christian life is centered on growing in character and doing the things of God in order to obtain a better resurrection, to be higher in that priesthood, to be a higher king in God's Kingdom. Many, I think, are all too willing to accept just salvation, if you can catch my drift—just enough *to make it*. And maybe those who think that is all they are doing, will not make it because they have that attitude. They just want to be saved.

What is being said here is that we should *strive* for as high a resurrection as possible, not accepting deliverance, except it be of God. Christ was made perfect through suffering. He endured persecution, and He obtained the best resurrection of all—that of *Firstborn* and *High Priest*. That job is taken. You cannot have it; but we *could be* very high up in God's Priesthood by living a righteous life. Once we get to that point, God will send persecution, because if you show that you want to please Him by being righteous, He will say, "Okay, you've come this far. I'm going to give you the opportunity to stretch up to that next level so you can obtain a better resurrection."

Remember I Corinthians 3? Some did works that were worthy of gold, of silver, of precious stones; and some did not. It is that whole idea. Christ is our *Archegos*, our Forerunner, our Trailblazer—and as He did, so will we do. If He has reached the highest office, so will God work in our lives so we can reach the highest office that we possibly can, with His help. I do not want anybody to think that we would do this on our own. That is not in any way what I am saying. What I am saying is that what we strive to do, that is what we should strive to do, and it will all come because of that grace of God that He works in our lives.

When we go through these things—and I am using the word *when* rather than *if*, because I am confident that we can be righteous if we allow God to work with us. But when we do go through these things, it will make us better priests. The suffering—the persecution—that we go through will give us the ability to relate to those who are suffering and who have suffered. We will be able as priests (remember the word means *bridge builder*) to bridge that gap between man and God, and be of great service to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Now I am not done trying to blow you away. There is more. I do not have very much time to do this, so we are going to fly. I wanted to get into just briefly the attitude He expects us to have while we are being persecuted, and I just want us to get a taste of how Jesus and the apostles, and even the prophets, approached the persecutions they endured.

Attitudes God expects us to have in persecutions:

## Patience

**James 1:2-4** My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work [there is that word *perfect* again, *coming to completion*] that you may be perfect and complete [he uses both of them in the same verse], lacking nothing.

When we go through these persecutions, we have to be patient and let God work them out so that we may be complete.

**I Peter 2:19-20** For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer for it, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God.

These words here are the famous *hupomone*. It is basically *endurance, perseverance, unswerving constancy*. It means *to wait on God for deliverance*. It means *to bear up courageously* through our suffering, letting Him deliver us. It is that *not giving in*.

**Psalm 40:1-2** I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry. He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps.

This is a psalm of David when he was being persecuted, and he just patiently waited on God to take his enemies out. And David did wait patiently on the Lord.

**Psalm 40:11-14** Do not withhold Your tender mercies from me, O LORD; let Your lovingkindness and Your truth continually preserve me. For innumerable evils have surrounded me; my iniquities have overtaken me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of my head; therefore my heart fails me. Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me; O LORD, make haste to help me! Let them be ashamed and brought to mutual confusion who seek to destroy my life; let them be driven backward and brought to dishonor who wish me evil.

### A Desire to Glorify God

**I Peter 4:16** Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter [for the persecution].

The attitude of praise and thanksgiving to God is not necessarily one we would think of humanly, while we are suffering, but Peter says here that we should glorify God during these times. We should give Him praise, and we also glorify Him in the way in which we go through the suffering—not just the words we speak, but also how we act during our persecution. Listen to Paul's example here in II Timothy 4.

**II Timothy 4:17** But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that the message might be preached fully through me, and that all the Gentiles might hear. Also I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion.

Evidently Paul was going to be cast into the Coliseum, or something like that, and thrown to the lions. But God worked it out so that he did not have to.

**II Timothy 4:18** And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen!

He saw the persecution as a means to give glory to God.

## Try to do Good

This third attitude is hard to do. I think these things get harder to do, if you want the order.

**I Peter 4:19** Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator.

Because God is working out this persecution, what should a Christian do? Well, he should do what he has always done—do good. That is what makes him a Christian. You have to commit your soul to God, and continue to do good.

Let us just look quickly in Luke 23 just to give you a taste of this. This is during the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

**Luke 23:27-29** And a great multitude of the people followed Him [while the cross was being taken], and women who also mourned and lamented Him. But Jesus, turning to them, said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For indeed the days are coming in which they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, the wombs that never bore, and the breasts which never nursed!'

Do you understand what He is doing here? He is preaching the gospel! He was on His way to being nailed to a stake, and raised up, and brutally killed—and He was preaching the gospel. He was doing good. You can read the rest of this section down to verse 43. He was up there on the cross talking to those thieves about the Kingdom of God. Paul did a similar thing when he was in jail. He never stopped preaching the gospel.

**Philippians 1:12-18** But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from good will. The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.

Paul preached the gospel while he was in chains, and it worked out that his persecution actually furthered the cause of the gospel rather than hinder it.

## We Must Have an Attitude of Joy

(You probably heard that snicker!) I said they get harder. They do. How in the world do you have joy in the midst of persecution?

**I Peter 4:12** Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you.

This is nothing new! Why are you so surprised? If you are righteous, it is going to happen, so just get used to it!

**I Peter 4:13** 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.

Oh! That is a tough cookie to chew! That is hard. But notice here, he put a qualification on this. "Be so joyful to the extent that you're suffering Christ's sufferings, and not because of sinner's stupidity on your part." A little caveat in there. You should be very, very happy and joyful if you are doing something God has allowed you to go through. But if you are there for your own stupidity, you are not being *wise as a serpent, and harmless as a dove*, as Jesus said, then you might not want to be too joyful.

But if you are doing it as suffering for God's sake, for Christ's sake, that is the reason to have joy. James 1:2 says, "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials." We read that. It is just not natural to rejoice when we are suffering. Not in the least. You can do it, we can do it **only** because the Holy Spirit is working in us. That is the only way you can rejoice in suffering.

**I Peter 1:3-9** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.

This is what we are rejoicing in; not in the pain and the suffering we are going through, but we are rejoicing that God has said, "Hey! Look there! Joe Christian. He's righteous. Let's send him into the den of lions and see if he can bear up under this persecution." And you know what, he is going to go up onto the next level and he is going to have a great reward in the Kingdom of God. What we are happy about is our salvation and the pat on the back that God is giving us, considering us worthy of the suffering. That is not the way we think. Not at all. It takes the Holy Spirit.

Now this is good. I have got to go to it. I am a little bit overtime, but I have got to do this because it just shows you the extent that the apostles went to, because they were righteous men and God was working through them.

**Acts 5:17-18** Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation, and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison.

They are being tried here. They had been set free, and then they were recaptured, reimprisoned, and Peter says, "We ought to obey God rather than men, (verse 29) and we won't do what you tell us to do, which is not preaching His name. We've got to."



**Acts 5:33-34** When they [the council] heard this, they were furious and took counsel to kill them. Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while.

**Acts 5:38-39** "And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God."

Now this is a direct fulfillment of what Christ said in Luke 23, that He said He would work these things out for them. The Sanhedrin agreed.

**Acts 5:40** And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them [they suffered], they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

The apostles already knew they were not going to do that. They already told them they were going to.

**Acts 5:41** So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.

Here you have real-live proof that it can be done, that you can rejoice through all kinds of suffering and persecution.

I hope by now that persecution is not such a bad word anymore—at least the good kind of persecution. Obviously no one wants to be persecuted. It is not something that we seek out, not in the least. None of us should want to be a martyr. Even our Savior, while He was there in the Garden of Gethsemane said, "Father, please take this cup from Me. But not My will, but Your will be done." He did not rush to Pilate and say, "String Me up." He did it the right way. He followed God's will. He was not necessarily too happy about it, but He knew He was doing God's will—and *that* He followed.

I just want to conclude with Matthew 5, as the standard of righteousness, just so we here at the end have the attitude of Jesus Christ, as far as persecutions go.

**Matthew 5:10-12** Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs 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.