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PERSECUTION AND SUFFERING FOR JESUS CHRIST

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one wants to suffer, but in a fallen world it is unavoidable. Whether physical pain or mental anguish, suffering is part of the human condition for everyone. However, this is not the type of suffering I want to explore in this article. Instead, I want to look at a

different kind of suffering: suffering because of our faith in and faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

Why take up such an unpleasant subject? Because if we understand the inevitability, purpose, and fruit of suffering for Christ — and the resources He gives us to face it — we will be better able to endure when it comes. Forewarned is forearmed.

This is obvious to believers living under oppressive regimes. However, some in the West may say, “Yes, but we aren’t facing that kind of persecution today.” It is true that for many centuries, followers of Jesus in Europe and America haven’t faced culture-wide persecution because of their faith in Christ. But that era has almost disappeared, and a new era is upon us. Exactly what it will be like is not yet clear, but it seems unlikely that it will be favorable to those who follow Jesus. Signs of opposition are already apparent.

John Stott has pointed out that “persecution is simply the clash between two irreconcilable value-systems.”¹ That clash is what we are seeing now, and it is ultimately between those who believe, trust, and love the God of the Bible and those who do not. The changes afoot today represent a sea-change from the past; the wind is no longer on our back but in our face. This is

FAITH

HOPE

LOVE

Clearly, persecution was a real possibility for anyone who followed Jesus, and He taught them the vital lesson that joy, love, and forgiveness were the way to respond.



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creating a cultural climate in the West in which persecution of Jesus's followers, simply for their allegiance to Him, is no longer unthinkable, whether in family, community, or workplace. This is confusing to some and frightening to others, but, as Gene Edward Veith points out,

One of the greatest paradoxes in Christian history is that the church is most pure in times of cultural hostility. When things are easy and good, that is when the church most often goes astray. When Christianity seems identical with the culture and even when the church seems to be enjoying its greatest earthly success, then it is weakest. Conversely, when the church encounters hardship, persecution, and suffering... then it is closest to its crucified Lord, then there are fewer hypocrites and nominal believers among its members, and then the faith of Christians burns most intensely.²

Let us then look at the teaching of Jesus, Paul, and Peter about persecution and suffering, seeking to learn valuable lessons along the way.

Jesus's Teaching and Example

What does Jesus say to us about persecution, and what resources does He provide for such times? We should begin by noting that Jesus was steeped in Scripture and knew all about the persecution and suffering of the prophets and other godly people in the Bible, people like Daniel (Dan. 6) and his three friends (Dan. 3) and others. He knew that such evil ultimately grows out of the spiritual darkness, blindness, error, and sin that dominate the hearts of fallen people and cause them to resist truth and righteousness. He also knew that as God's Suffering Servant (Isa. 53), He would experience the full assault of men and devils against His earthly ministry and would ultimately die by crucifixion. He understood



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as well the opposition that His followers would face from their families, communities, the world, and the devil, and He sought to prepare them.

Jesus frequently warned His followers that they would face persecution and suffering. The first instance comes at the beginning of His ministry, when Jesus taught the Sermon on the Mount. This teaching was (and still is) basic training about life in God's kingdom and how to be a disciple of Jesus. He began with the Beatitudes, which is a profile of a disciple (Christian) and includes a readiness to suffer.

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matt. 5:10–12)*³

John Stott comments,

*How did Jesus expect His disciples to react under persecution? [In Matt. 5:12 He said], "Rejoice and be glad!" We are not to retaliate like an unbeliever, nor sulk like a child, nor lick our wound in self-pity like a dog, nor just grin and bear it like a Stoic, still less pretend we enjoy it like a masochist. What then? We are to rejoice as a Christian should and even "leap for joy" (Lk. 6:23).*⁴

Near the end of that same chapter, Jesus also said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). Clearly, persecution was a real possibility for anyone who followed Jesus, and He taught them the vital lesson that joy, love, and forgiveness were the way to respond. This is a fundamental lesson for us today.



FORGIVENESS



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Later in His ministry, Jesus taught more broadly about what was required to follow Him, and suffering looms large there, too:

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. (Mark 8:34–38)

The first condition Jesus gives is to *deny oneself*. This means that would-be disciples must say a radical no to their self-centered life and instead center their lives on Christ. Doing this prepares the way for the second condition, to *take up the cross*, the dreaded Roman instrument of execution. This means a willingness to die for Jesus if faithfulness requires it. These two conditions clear the way to actually *follow Jesus* — His teaching and example in daily life.

The larger context of this passage shows that Jesus, the Suffering Servant, was on His way to Jerusalem and the cross. Those who would be His followers might well experience the same fate and needed to take that into account.

Jesus’s final warnings about persecution and suffering came at the end of His earthly ministry. In the Upper Room, He told His disciples, “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” (John 15:20). Then He elaborated,

I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering



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service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you. (John 16:1–4).

This warning was specifically intended to keep His followers from losing their faith in the fires of persecution that they would soon encounter. *The lesson remains valuable today: we are likely to experience persecution at some point because of our allegiance to Christ and the gospel and should prepare for it. Being reminded of the possibility helps us to get ready.*

Soon after Jesus ascended to heaven, persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem because of their preaching about Him and His resurrection (Acts 4:1–22). Then Stephen was stoned to death for preaching about Jesus (Acts 7). Following that, a great persecution was directed against the church in Jerusalem, and everyone except the apostles left for other places, preaching the gospel as they went (Acts 8:1). Herod then killed James, the brother of John, and arrested Peter with the intention of executing him as well (Acts 12:1–3). These are just a few examples of life in the early days of the Spirit-filled church, presented in Acts.

Paul's Experience

Into this maelstrom came the dreaded Saul of Tarsus, chief persecutor of the church. But in a surprising turn of events, he met Christ on the Damascus Road. Three days later, Jesus sent the protesting Ananias to baptize him, explaining that “he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:15–16). The one who had approved the first martyrdom was made an apostle and would eventually become a martyr himself. From the start, Paul experienced opposition and suffering, and he warned all believers





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to expect it. Early in his ministry, we read of him “strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14.22).

Paul suffered persecution and hardship throughout his life. We get a snapshot of it some seven or eight years before his death, when Paul compared himself to the false apostles in Corinth:

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one — I am talking like a madman — with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? (2 Cor. 11:23–29)

Paul suffered greatly in order to faithfully serve Christ. He did so not because he was a religious extremist or a masochist, but because of his love for “the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). *This is another crucial lesson, for there is a point at which bare commitment will fail and only love for Christ can sustain us.*

Because of love for Christ and His grace, Paul did not harbor resentment and bitterness toward those who had inflicted so much pain and suffering upon him. He had been forgiven much, and in turn he forgave much. Like Jesus, he commanded all believers to



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do the same, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them” (Rom. 12:14). This is a lesson we cannot hear too often!

Near the end of his life, Paul wrote to Timothy, his faithful son in the faith, seeking to encourage and strengthen him. Looking back over his life, Paul said,

You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra — which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (2 Tim. 3:10–12)

The last sentence captures a lesson we should ponder and memorize: “All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” Persecution in some form is guaranteed for Christians. Ask yourself, “Am I living a godly life? If so, where am I being persecuted?”

As Paul reflected further on his life:

The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. (2 Tim. 4:6–8)

When he went to trial, there would be no human comfort for Paul. He had to stand alone before the tribunal of Nero in Rome. But he tells us, “The Lord stood by me and strengthened me” (2 Tim. 4:17). When it came his time to die, Paul was able to face the executioner with confident faith and expectant hope.

We see three important lessons here. First, living a life that was



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faithful to Jesus prepared Paul to die well. Second, at the time of death (not before), God gave him “dying grace” so he could glorify him in it.

A third lesson is that Paul, the great apostle of grace, man of faith, and devoted disciple of Jesus, was not spared suffering and a brutal death by beheading. Unlike Abraham and Sarah, Joseph and David, he did not live a long, prosperous life and die of old age. Rather, in God’s providence he was among those heroes of the faith who

suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated — of whom the world was not worthy — wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. (Heb. 11:36–38)

This is yet another reminder that since we do not know the time or manner of our death, we need to be prepared for whatever may come.

Peter’s Perspective

Peter wrote words of encouragement and direction to the believers under persecution across Asia Minor. He was writing at the threshold of the Neronian persecution of AD 64. The Roman historian Tacitus describes the horrors that Emperor Nero, a madman, unleashed on the Christians in Rome to divert attention from himself as the likely instigator of the Great Fire that had destroyed much of the city:

Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the



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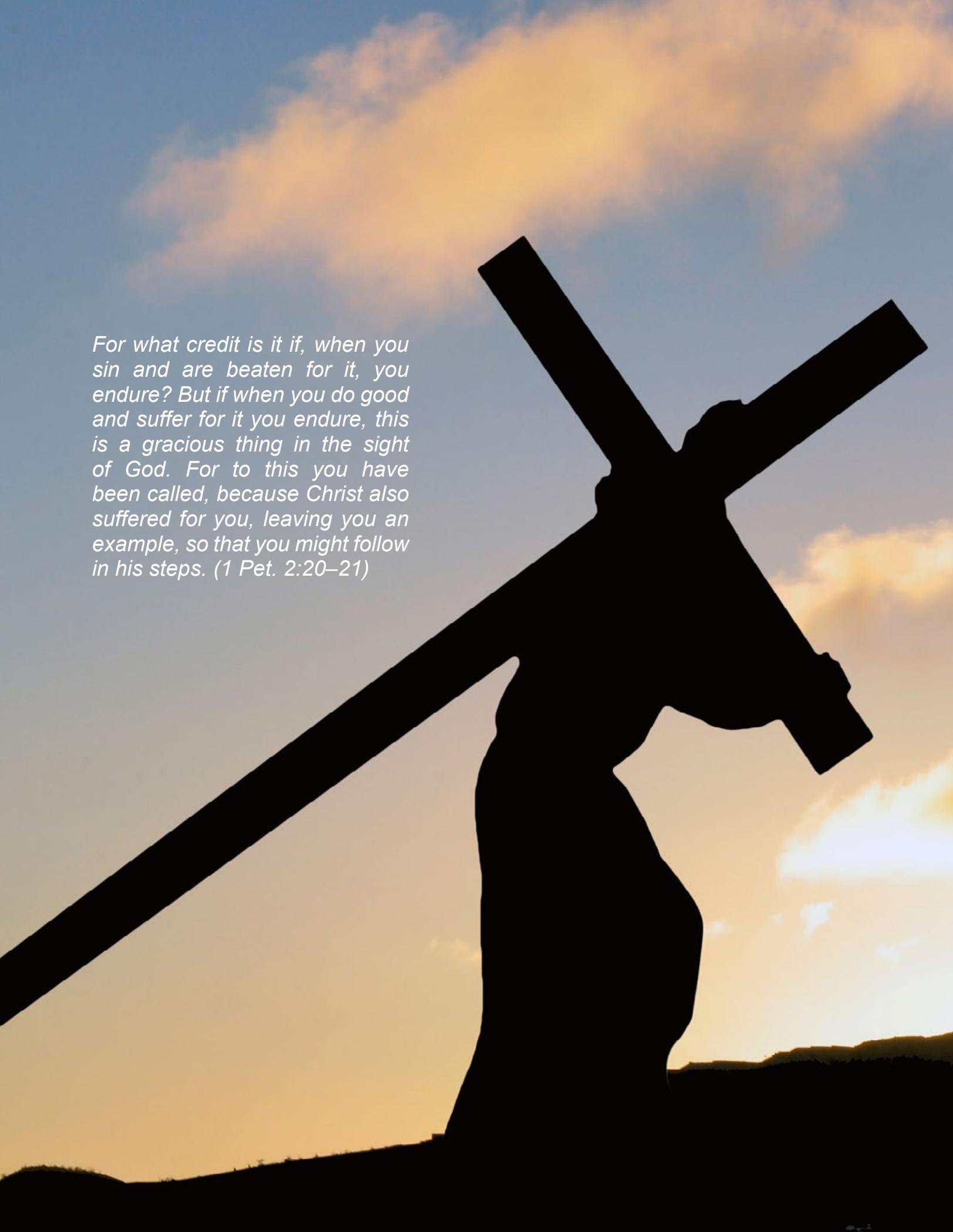
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populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judæa, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind... Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed.⁵

It was in such a time as this that Peter wrote these words:

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Pet. 1:6–7)

For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to

A large, dark silhouette of a cross is centered in the frame. The cross is composed of three thick, dark beams. The background is a sky at sunset or sunrise, with a gradient from light blue at the top to a warm orange and yellow near the horizon. There are scattered, soft white clouds. The bottom of the image shows a dark silhouette of a landscape, possibly hills or a field.

For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. (1 Pet. 2:20–21)



I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. *(Rev. 3:15–22)*



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this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. (1 Pet. 2:20–21)

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. (1 Pet. 4:12–19)

Lessons on suffering from Peter include that our faith is tested in order to show its genuineness; that we, though innocent, should expect fiery trials; that we are called to follow the example of Christ and suffer as He did; that we should rejoice to share His sufferings; and that we are to glorify God in suffering and entrust our souls to Him.

Later Church History

After the death of the apostles, persecution and suffering continued until AD 313 in the Western Roman Empire and even later in the Eastern part. It was not intense, unremitting, and empire-wide during all these years. Though there were a couple



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of notable exceptions, persecution was typically local or regional in extent, varied in intensity, and could occur for several reasons (often from charges of atheism, cannibalism, and incest). Although persecution took a toll, God used it to advantage. As Tertullian famously said in the third century, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Looking back from the early fifth century, Jerome concurred: “Persecutions have made the church of Christ grow; martyrdoms have crowned it.”

The ever-present possibility of persecution also served to keep believers close to the Lord and one another, to restrain love of the world, and to discourage interest on the part of those who were not serious about following Christ. However, when persecution subsided for extended periods of time, Christianity would again become fashionable, and people with questionable faith would join the church. In the intense persecutions following the two longest periods of peace, 211–250 and 258–303, many became apostate.

Jesus warned of this danger in the parable of the sower, “As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away” (Matt. 13:20–21).

There is a message here for those who of us who live in relatively affluent circumstances, enjoying lives of ease and comfort, unthreatened in our faith. As Leonard Ravenhill once observed, “The early Church was married to poverty, prisons and persecutions. Today, the church is married to prosperity, personality, and popularity.” Should persecution unexpectedly arise, will we discover that we have become soft, self-indulgent, and unwilling to sacrifice our reputations, worldly goods, lifestyles, possibly even our lives, in order to be faithful to Jesus? I trust not. But if we want to pass the test, we will need to have repented of



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any sins or compromise, to have forsaken the lukewarmness that is so common in much of the church today, and to be daily seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. As Jesus said to the Laodicean church,

I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Rev. 3:15–22)

Conclusion

Let us conclude this brief study of persecution and suffering with the words of Paul, disciple, apostle, and martyr:

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs — heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.



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For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Rom. 8:15–18)

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:35–39) ■

NOTES

¹ John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1978), 52.

² Gene Edward Veith, *Tabletalk* 28, no. 8: 18.

³ Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

⁴ Stott, *Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 52.

⁵ Tacitus, *The Annals* 15.44.



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Those who suffer the same things from
the same people for the same Person can
scarcely not love each other.

— *C.S. Lewis*



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1

According to Tom Tarrants, what does Jesus say to us about persecution, and what resources does He provide for such times?

2

What message does Tarrants offer “for those of us who live in relatively affluent circumstances, enjoying lives of ease and comfort, unthreatened in our faith,” and what sources underlie that message? What is your response?



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Tom Tarrants has lived in the Washington, DC area since 1978 and served as President of the C.S. Lewis Institute from 1998 to April 2010. He is currently Vice President for Ministry & Director, Washington Area Fellows Program. Prior to coming to the Institute, he served as co-pastor of Christ Our Shepherd Church in Washington, DC. Tom holds a Master of Divinity Degree, as well as a Doctor of Ministry Degree in Christian Spirituality.

He is an ordained minister in the Evangelical Church Alliance and a member of the Evangelical Theological Society.

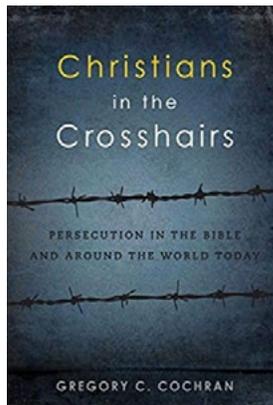


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RECOMMENDED READING



Gregory C. Cochran, *Christians in the Crosshairs: Persecution in the Bible and Around the World Today* (Weaver Books, 2016)

An insightful and (surprisingly) encouraging biblical explanation as to why trouble and persecution are inevitable for Christians. Since they are a peculiar people, are in the world but not of the world, and follow a Master who is offensive to many, Christians are naturally the objects of disdain and hostility. Understanding the nature of the enmity between the world and the Christian is critical for living in a world where Satan is its prince. The book is an attempt to start a conversation about the reality of Christian persecution. It is a wake-up call to the modern church, especially in the United States. “My hope for all who read this volume,” writes the author, “is a strengthened faith. One of the most surprising aspects of studying persecution has been its effect on me. I thought I would feel woeful and defeated after hearing of such great suffering. However, the opposite is true. The Gospel, with its resurrection power, is able to take the worst situations and reframe them in victory. Hearing stories of triumph through suffering has been nothing short of glorious.”