

THE INCREASE OF INTOLERANCE

Selected Scriptures

In this lesson we consider the growing trend toward persecution of Christians in America and how to prepare for it.

OUTLINE

When we speak of persecution, most Christians think of physical torture or punishment. But that is too narrow. Persecution encompasses all manner of oppression against a person's faith commitments. In that sense, the persecution of Christians in America has already begun.

- I. **The Substance of Christian Persecution**
- II. **The Stages of Christian Persecution**
 - A. Stage One: Stereotyping
 - B. Stage Two: Marginalizing
 - C. Stage Three: Threatening
 - D. Stage Four: Intimidating
 - E. Stage Five: Litigating
- III. **The Story of Christian Persecution**
 - A. Persecution of Christians in the Bible
 - B. Persecution of Christians in History
 - C. Persecution of Christians in Today's World
- IV. **The Side Effects of Christian Persecution**
 - A. Suffering Promotes Character
 - B. Suffering Provokes Courage
 - C. Suffering Proves Godliness
 - D. Suffering Produces Joy
 - E. Suffering Provides Rewards
- V. **The Strength to Face Christian Persecution**
 - A. Determine to Stand for Truth
 - B. Draw Support From One Another
 - C. Derive Your Security From the Lord

OVERVIEW

In the last few years, an increasing number of churches, businesses, and individuals have come under legal attack for standing on their biblical principles. These attacks have mostly been generated when Christians have resisted the decay of biblical sexual-moral standards in the U.S.

Jesus scolded the Pharisees for their inability to discern the signs of the times in their day (Matthew 16:3). The signs of *our* time could not be more clear: America is growing increasingly hostile toward biblical Christianity. The Bible is no longer America's moral compass. Those who hold to biblical principles are cited as intolerant at best and lawbreakers at worst.

THE SUBSTANCE OF CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION

America's biblical foundation began to erode in the post-World War II prosperity which resulted in the protest culture of the 1960s. Freedom has been replaced by license. "If it feels good, do it" is now the guiding principle of American culture, pushing Christianity to the margins of the marketplace.

The Pew Research Center reports that Christianity is declining sharply in America. In 2014 about 70 percent of American adults identified as Christians.¹ But this figure is misleading. According to a study by sociologists C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler published in *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, less than 20 percent of Americans regularly attend church on a weekly basis.² This statistic gives us a better indication of actual Christian commitment.

Dr. Paul Nyquist, the president of Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, writes, "Get ready. An exciting, yet terrifying era is beginning for American believers. As cultural changes sweep our country, we'll soon be challenged to live out what the Bible says about confronting and responding to persecution."³

THE STAGES OF CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION

Five stages of religious suppression and persecution are taking place in America.

Stage One: Stereotyping

Today Christians are often stereotyped as ignorant, uneducated, backward, inhibited, homophobic, hateful, and intolerant. Movies and television portray Christians as the cultural "bad guy," the unreasonable character who is judgmental and out of step with the mainstream.

While it's true that some professing Christians do a poor job of representing the faith, these stereotypes do not reflect the reality of authentic Christianity. They grow out of the rising cultural prejudice against the Christian faith. Our duty is to live our convictions in a way that shows these slanderous pictures to be gross distortions of the truth.

Stage Two: Marginalizing

Many would prefer for Christianity not only to be criticized but to be marginalized—to be pushed so far to the periphery of society that it is, for all practical purposes, eliminated. If Christianity can't legally be eliminated, they want to force it behind closed doors. They want Christianity's influence on American culture to be removed. For example, the secularization of holidays like Christmas and Easter. And it's happening. Christian student organizations are now barred from many university campuses. Courts have eliminated Christmas carols in some public schools, and doctors and small business owners are being forced to serve homosexual clients.

Stage Three: Threatening

Many individuals have been fired from companies for expressing their religious beliefs and practices *on their own time*. The very thought that a practicing Christian might bring some harm or disrespect to a government agency or a company is driving these terminations. Or, more likely, it is the fear of a lawsuit by intolerant groups against agencies and companies. Companies figure it is easier to fire the Christian than to go through a lengthy adjudication of the employees' rights.

Stage Four: Intimidating

In 2001, California parents sued to prevent psychological testing on first, third, and fifth graders because the tests contained explicit sexual questions. They lost. The court's ruling: "Parents have no due process or privacy right to override the determinations of public schools as to the information to which their children will be exposed."⁴

This is only one example. Similar cases of loss-of-rights now occur regularly and people are being forced into compliance by the government.

Stage Five: Litigating

Christian small business owners who have declined the business of homosexual patrons have been taken to court and fined. Some have lost their businesses and some have received death threats. Public schools have long been the target of activists like the ACLU. When they took steps to prevent any kind of religious expressions at the graduation ceremonies of a Florida high school, the students themselves struck back. They rose together and recited the Lord's Prayer on their own, motivating many in attendance to join them.⁵

Unless there is a great turnaround, we can expect lawsuits and court judgments to escalate against Christians who practice their faith. According to one writer, "Persecution could well accelerate to include Henry VIII-style seizure of church property and monies because of Christian leaders' refusal to bow to the doctrines of the State . . . even jail time for Christians is quite possible."⁶

Christians in America are not likely to experience the kinds of persecution and torture seen in other countries today. And yet, I never imagined a few decades ago that what is happening in America to Christians would be possible. So who knows what the future holds?

THE STORY OF CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION

God's people have always been persecuted, even in the Old Testament (Hebrews 11:35-38). Christ was persecuted as were His apostles—as He warned them they would be (Matthew 10:16-20). To be persecuted for righteousness' sake means that we are hated or opposed solely for being a follower of Christ. When we are doing what is right and living for God, yet suffer because of it, that is persecution.

In America, we have traditionally held a too-narrow view of persecution—that it refers only to physical attacks. But persecution can include mental, spiritual, and emotional oppression brought about through any number of means, all for simply being a Christian. And *Christianity Today* magazine reminds us that "most persecution is not violence. Instead, it's a 'squeeze' of Christians in five spheres of life: private, family, community, national, and church."⁷

Why does the Christian message, and those who follow it, motivate such antagonism? Because it requires submission to God. Those antagonistic to the Gospel feel judged, and rightly so. Not judged by other Christians, but by God Himself. And without a proper understanding of God's *right* to judge sinners, that produces a backlash against God and His people. Ultimately, all are without excuse as Paul wrote in Romans 1:20-21. Because they don't like, and cannot silence, the message; opponents attack the messenger.

Persecution of Christians in the Bible

Persecution in the New Testament begins with Christ's birth in Bethlehem when Herod tried to kill Him when He was just a baby. Jesus was persecuted as an adult as was John the Baptist, the apostles, the deacon Stephen, the Christians living in Jerusalem, and the apostle Paul in extreme measure (2 Corinthians 11:22-29). All the apostles died grisly deaths at the hands of Christ's opponents.

It is amazing that the early Christians in Jerusalem, in the midst of persecution, bound themselves to one another and to the Lord and continued on. They pooled their resources and took care of each other (Acts 4:32-35). In fact, they even rejoiced that their persecution provided a great opportunity for God to display Himself (Acts 4:29-30).

Persecution of Christians in History

The Roman emperor Nero impaled Christians on stakes and set them afire as torches. He sent them into the arenas to be eaten by wild animals and killed by gladiators. He executed both Peter and Paul. Emperor Domitian declared himself to be "God the Lord" and demanded Christians worship him. When they refused they were killed. The apostle John was exiled to Patmos by Domitian. Until Constantine became emperor and declared Christianity legal in A.D. 313, Christians were persecuted in the Roman Empire.

Millions more Christians have been killed in various parts of the world since the first century for various reasons. Stories abound of Christians willingly suffering persecution for the sake of their Savior. Catholic Queen Mary of England—called "Bloody Mary" for her execution of more than 300 Protestants—sentenced Henry VIII's former chaplain, Nicholas Ridley, to be burned. "As he was being tied to the stake, Ridley prayed, 'Oh, heavenly Father, I give unto thee most hearty thanks that thou hast called me to be a professor of thee, even unto death.'"⁸

Persecution of Christians in Today's World

Worldwide each month, 322 Christians are killed for their faith, 214 church buildings and Christian properties are destroyed, and 772 forms of violence are committed against individual Christians or Christian groups. Those figures add up to more than 15,000 incidents of serious persecution of Christians per year. This does not include the more than 200 million Christians who, according to the World Evangelical Alliance, are presently denied fundamental human rights just because of their faith. The top ten persecuting countries are North Korea, Iraq, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Iran, and Libya.⁹ America could soon join this list.

THE SIDE EFFECTS OF CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION

Let me suggest five ways persecution can be a positive thing for a Christian.

**Suffering Promotes Character*

The New Testament clearly teaches that tribulation—and that would include persecution—builds character: Romans 5:2-5; James 1:2-4. If you want proven character, persecution is one way to get it.

Suffering Provokes Courage

Courage is a reflection of the life of Christ in the Christian. Jesus was not a coward. He entrusted Himself to the Father and drank from the bitter cup of persecution. Peter and John told the Jewish officials that they would not stop preaching the Gospel, that it was their duty to obey God rather than man (Acts 4:19-20; 5:29). The apostle Paul's post-conversion life was a living display of courage (Philippians 1:20-21).

Suffering Proves Godliness

Paul wrote that all who want to live a godly life for Christ will suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). Professing Christians who are not suffering may need to examine the depth of their godliness. Suffering is a form of cleansing and maturing (Hebrews 12:6; Peter 5:10). Jesus learned obedience through the things He suffered (Hebrews 5:8) and so can we. *Suffering* for Christ is a sure sign we are *living* for Christ (Romans 8:16-17).

Suffering Produces Joy

When Paul and Silas were confined to jail in Philippi, they contented themselves with "praying and singing hymns to God" (Acts 16:22-25). Peter and John went away from their persecution "rejoicing" at the privilege of suffering for Christ (Acts 5:41).

Suffering Provides Rewards

What are some of the rewards promised to those who endure persecution?

- Those who endure will be avenged (Revelation 6:9-11; 16:5-7; 18:20; 19:2).
- They will be rewarded with white robes, signifying holiness and purity (Revelation 6:11).
- They will be given perfect and abundant lives free of sorrow (Revelation 7:14-17).
- Heaven will rejoice over them because they did not shrink from death (Revelation 12:11-12).
- They will find eternal rest (Revelation 14:13).
- They will reign with Christ for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:4, 6).
- They will receive the crown of eternal life (James 1:12).
- They will have no more death to fear (1 Corinthians 15:54; Revelation 20:14).

THE STRENGTH TO FACE CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION

The time to prepare to face persecution is before it happens. If we wait until persecution arises, our emotions will rule the day. We must decide in the calm of commitment what we will do if persecution comes. Following are three things we can do to prepare.

Determine to Stand for Truth

In his famous Harvard commencement address, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said, "A decline in courage may be the most striking feature that an outside observer notices in the West in our days."¹⁰ We as Christians must turn that criticism on its head. It is imperative that fear of rejection, criticism, or loss does not cover us into hiding our light. To live worthy of the Gospel is to stand for God's truth without bending. As Paul urged the Corinthians, "Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. Let all *that* you do *be* done with love" (1 Corinthians 16:13-14).

We must be prepared to take whatever criticism or persecution comes our way. We must be willing to be "fools for Christ's sake" (1 Corinthians 4:10). Paul gave us our rules of engagement: "Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being defamed, we entreat" (1 Corinthians 4:12-13). And we must be prepared to defend our faith (1 Peter 3:15-16).

Draw Support From One Another

Hebrews 10:24-25 says it best: "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching." When persecution comes, we need the support of the Body of Christ. We need the Church and the Church needs us. The worst place to be in the midst of persecution is *alone*. Elijah survived the persecution of Queen Jezebel by discovering there were 7,000 more in Israel who were standing firm against the wicked queen and king (1 Kings 19:14-18).

We too need the company of others like ourselves with whom we can share encouragement, struggles, and victories. In today's culture this need is greater than ever. Now in the minority and under attack, it's easy for us to feel alone and discouraged, as Elijah did. But in the company of fellow believers, we draw strength, discipline, knowledge, encouragement, support, and love from each other. A courageous example can spur any one of us to say, "If she can do it, by God's grace so can I."

Derive Your Security From the Lord

We must keep our eye on the prize when the pressure of persecution hits. We belong to Christ; we are on our way to heaven; nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ; all things work together for the good of those who belong to Him. The greatest temptation in the face of persecution is to do *anything* to save our life. But remember Jesus' words: "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25).

According to C. S. Lewis we are in "enemy-occupied territory." There will be attacks, even some casualties. But our citizenship is in heaven. We are simply waiting here on earth for Him to appear from heaven to transform us into His own image (Philippians 3:20-21).

What will you do if repression and coercion in America ultimately lead to persecution? Don't wait until it happens to decide who you serve. Draw a line in the sand and stand on the side of Christ. Trust your past, present, and future to the One who has promised to save you forever.

Notes:

1. "America's Changing Religious Landscape," *Pew Research Center*, May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>. Accessed April 11, 2016.
2. Kelly Shattuck, "7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America," *Church Leader*, <http://www.churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html>. Accessed April 11, 2016.
3. J. Paul Nyquist, *Prepare* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2015), 10.
4. "Ninth Circuit Decision Denies Parents' Rights," *Education Reporter*, December 2005, <http://www.eagleforum.org/educate/2005/dec05/9th-circuit.html>. Accessed April 6, 2016.
5. Bob Unruh, "Graduating Students Defy ACLU," *WND*, June 5, 2009, <http://www.wnd.com/2009/06/100274/>. Accessed April 7, 2016.
6. Fay Voshell, "Persecution of Christians in America: It's Not Just 'Over There,'" *American Thinker*, May 10, 2015, http://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2015/05/persecution_of_christians_in_america_its_not_just_over_there.html.
7. "Inside the Persecution Numbers," *Christianity Today*, March 2014, 14.
8. "Bishops Ridley and Latimer Burned," *Christianity.com*, <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1501-1600/bishops-ridley-and-latimer-burned-11629990.html>. Accessed April 9, 2016.
9. "Christian Persecution," *Open Doors*, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/>. Accessed April 7, 2016.
10. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Harvard Commencement Address*, June 8, 1978.

APPLICATION

1. Read Hebrews 11:35-40.
 - a. What is the overall context of this passage? (Remember: Hebrews 11 is the "Hall of Faith" chapter.)
 - b. Why were some of these martyrs willing to die, refusing to be released from torture? (verse 35)
 - c. How does verse 36 suggest that personal ridicule qualifies as persecution? (See "mockings.") Have you suffered this kind of persecution for your faith?
 - d. How is being "tempted" a form of persecution? (verse 37) Would someone lay a trap hoping for your moral failure?
 - e. What is true even when a Christian dies from persecution? (verses 39-40)
 - f. Why is citizenship in heaven the ultimate hope for those who are persecuted? (Philippians 3:20) Who can take that away from you?
2. What was the first act of persecution recorded in the New Testament? (Matthew 2:1-16)
3. What happened to John the Baptist? (Mark 6:25-29)
4. How was Jesus treated during His short time on earth?
 - a. Luke 4:28-30
 - b. Luke 13:31
 - c. John 5:16-18
 - d. John 8:37-40
 - e. What did Jesus learn through His persecutions? (Hebrews 5:8)
 - f. Why is discomfort or suffering the only place where obedience can be learned?
5. Describe what happened to Peter and the apostles in Jerusalem after Christ's ascension:
 - a. Acts 4:1-3, 18
 - b. Acts 5:17-18
 - c. Acts 12:1-4
 - d. How did the apostles react to this persecution? (Acts 4:19-20; 5:29)

- e. What did they ask God to do for them? (Acts 4:29-30) Given how the Jewish leaders would respond, what were they asking God for? (More _____)
- f. What was the early church in Jerusalem forced to do? (Acts 8:1)
- g. Explain what the early church father, Tertullian, meant:
"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."
6. Summarize the kinds of things the apostle Paul suffered for the Gospel. (2 Corinthians 6:4-5; 11:22-29)
7. How would you describe your "persecution quotient"? How would you respond if persecution of Christians in America begins to affect your livelihood or your life?

DID YOU KNOW?

The most comprehensive account of Christian persecution was compiled by John Foxe in England and published in 1563. It is still in print today as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, its original title being too long: *Actes and Monuments of these Latter and Perillous Days, Touching Matters of the Church*. Written during the reign of Protestant Queen Elizabeth I, it was originally published in five books. It covered the earliest Christian persecutions, the Catholic Inquisitions in the medieval period, the early English Protestant movement, the separation of the Church of England from Rome, and finally the persecutions of Protestants by Catholic Queen Mary who herself was responsible for executing more than 300 Protestant leaders in England.