

THE SUFFERING BROTHERHOOD

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We Are Community

Communion means identifying with Jesus Christ, AND with His people (the Church).

Recognize and honor the body of Christ... (1 Corinthians 11)

Not only those who are visibly near us, but those who are distant—whether by culture or by location. We are to extend brotherly love to all, and especially to those whose faith grows in the fire of persecution.

Real Christianity

Why are so many Christians persecuted for the faith around the world today? One pastor in Sri Lanka, who has been harassed for his faith, responded with a twinkle in his eye, “So that the rest of you will remember what real Christianity looks like.”

The disciples and apostles of the Early Church felt the flames of persecution from their own countrymen for nearly 300 years. Eleven of the first twelve apostles of Christ died at the hands of persecutors. And Christians have felt significant persecution somewhere in the world in every century since then.

The lack of persecution that most Christians in the United States of America have experienced in the past two hundred years is unusual. Tim Eriksen describes the United States as God’s secret weapon—a strategic move that Satan never saw coming—a nation whose law and culture are rooted in the faith and compassion of Jesus Christ. Yet, we are not immune.

The persecution of Christians in America is growing—in society, in politics, and in legislation.

The Bible is clear that all who desire and aim to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12).

The Center for the Global Study of Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary estimates that 900,000 Christians have died because of the Name of Jesus during the decade between 2005 and 2015. That's 90,000 people each year, or one person every six minutes.

Why do some Christians choose to stay in such oppressive conditions?

Why do missionaries willingly go to such places where life is so difficult?

For Love's Sake

I believe the primary answer to those two questions is this: *For love's sake.*

Jesus taught us that we're to do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who mistreat us (Luke 6:27-28).

Some persecuted believers choose to go underground, skirting the threat, while building the flock of God.

Where the structure of authority offers respect and freedom (as here in the United States)—even if individuals do not—others seek to work through the existing authorities and structures to create better conditions for everyone.

Paul called out as a Roman citizen that he was being persecuted without trial and without opportunity to speak to his own defense. This is an entirely appropriate response (though not the only one possible) for those who are being persecuted—to call on civil authorities to do what the civil authorities should do: to protect their citizens.

Facing Hostility

1 Peter offers four ways that all believers should learn to live in a hostile culture:

(1) We should honor the local authorities;

"For the Lord's sake, submit to all human authority—whether the king as head of state,¹⁴ or the officials he has appointed. For the king has sent

them to punish those who do wrong and to honor those who do right” (1 Peter 2:13-14).

(2) We should honor God in our work;

“You who are slaves must submit to your masters with all respect. Do what they tell you—not only if they are kind and reasonable, but even if they are cruel. For God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:18, 21).

(3) We should honor God in our families;

“In the same way, you wives must accept the authority of your husbands. Then, even if some refuse to obey the Good News, your godly lives will speak to them without any words. They will be won over by observing your pure and reverent lives.

“In the same way, you husbands must give honor to your wives. Treat your wife with understanding as you live together. She may be weaker than you are, but she is your equal partner in God’s gift of new life. Treat her as you should so your prayers will not be hindered” (1 Peter 3:1-2, 7).

(4) We should honor God in how we suffer.

“But even if you suffer for doing what is right, God will reward you for it. So don’t worry or be afraid of their threats. Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ. Remember, it is better to suffer for doing good, if that is what God wants, than to suffer for doing wrong!” (1 Peter 3:14-17).

Uniquely, the way we endure suffering provides an opportunity for us to present the Gospel as a living witness.

“Dying Out Loud” (the story of Stan & Ann Steward, who served for years as AG missionaries in Turkey)

The Will of God

Many think that when we are in the will of God we're not going to suffer, but it's not true. Jesus is our prime example of that. He also said that even when we are in God's will and under God's blessing, we may be persecuted (Matthew 5:10-12). But He will be with us always.

Paul and Barnabas encouraged the believers of the Middle East *"to continue in the faith, reminding them that we must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God"* (Acts 14:22).

And Peter reminds us that *"it is no shame to suffer for being a Christian. Praise God for the privilege of being called by his name!"* (1 Peter 4:16).

All of this should work in us a compassionate heart toward others who suffer for the faith.

We are urged to *"continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering"* (Hebrews 13:3).

Readiness

Since we have experienced so little religious persecution in this country, it is possible that under pressure many would deny Christ. Some who shout their faith the loudest may surrender the soonest. Some who boast of their courage for Christ may turn out to be the most cowardly. Some who say, "Though all others deny Christ, yet I will never deny Him" (like Peter did), may be the first to warm their hands at the campfires of the enemy.

In the last days, Jesus warned, *"Sin will be rampant everywhere, and the love of many will grow cold"* (Matthew 24:12).

He also warned, *"you will be arrested, persecuted, and killed. You will be hated all over the world because you are my followers, and many will turn away from me and betray and hate each other"* (Matthew 24:9).

“Therefore,” Paul counseled us, “put on every piece of God’s armor so you will be able to resist the enemy in the time of evil. Then after the battle you will still be standing firm” (Ephesians 6:13).

Persecution doesn’t begin with prison or torture. It begins with **scorn**. Then scorn turns to open scoffing. Scoffing become bullying. Bullying leads to beatings or other damage. If authorities agree with the culture of scorn, legal oppression and imprisonment will follow.

My aim is not to scare you. Some of you are here today, because you fled such hostilities. Thank God for your escape! But America is not immune. The “American dream” is still a dream; it is not a universal reality.

How can you prepare yourself for persecution *at any level*?

1. Make sure of your own relationship with God through Christ.

We prepare for everything else—driver’s license, education, marriage, career. What about meeting God face-to-face? It’s the one thing that is absolutely, universally certain.

2. Walk with God faithfully and persistently.

Abraham was known as a friend of God. Moses spoke with God face to face. David was “a man after God’s heart.” Daniel and his friends vowed faithfulness to God alone, even if He did not deliver them.

And God does not always deliver, as was the case with an early deacon, named Stephen, and eleven of the twelve appointed apostles, who were martyred for their faith in Christ.

3. Assimilate Scripture

Read, study, memorize, think, and proclaim God’s Word.

“Stand your ground, putting on the belt of truth and the body armor of God’s righteousness. For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News so that you will be fully prepared. In addition to all of these, hold up the shield of faith to stop the fiery arrows of the devil. Put on salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:14-17).

Relish God's words as the staff of eternal life.

Prepare yourself for times of crisis; remember Jesus' responses to Satan in the wilderness? He said repeatedly, "It is written."

4. Pray always.

"Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere" (Ephesians 6:18).

In a materialistic world, the Church must have a revival of prayer. Prayerless Christianity is a sham, a hoax, a falsehood. If you do not practice prayerfulness, I have the right to wonder if you are a Christian.

5. Meditate on Christ.

Practice the presence of God.

*"May the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be pleasing to you,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."*
(Psalm 19:14)

We will only prove loyal to Christ in a crisis, if He is vitally real to us in everyday life.

At present, international threats are just threats, but they are *real* threats. America's military might and technological advancement will be insufficient in a time of great crisis (even if it is the result only of a natural disaster), and cannot save us.

*Seek the Lord while you can find him.
Call on him now while he is near.
Let the wicked change their ways
and banish the very thought of doing wrong.
Let them turn to the Lord that he may have mercy on them.
Yes, turn to our God, for he will forgive generously.*
(Isaiah 55:6-7)

A final word from the Apostle Peter:

“Treat everyone you meet with dignity. Love (the brotherhood) your spiritual family. Revere God. Respect the government” (1 Peter 2:17; The Message).

We are part of the suffering brotherhood that was founded by our Savior Jesus.

When the going is hard, don't just pray for deliverance. First, pray for grace to make the most of the hardship, for the sake of Christ.

He will strengthen you. Then, He will bring you through to the other side. He always provides a “way of escape,” but only at the end of the journey. Trust in Christ to help you, so you may discover what “real Christianity looks like.”