

Persecution in the Early Church

by Wayne Goff

It would be a valid statement to say that the first Christians expected persecution. Jesus had said to the Twelve, “Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also” (Jn. 15:20). Indeed, the only apostle not to have suffered a martyr’s death was John. Paul, an apostle born out of due time (1 Cor. 15:8) was hounded throughout Asia Minor as he established one church after another (see Acts 13:50, 14:4-6, 14:19-20, 16:19-23, 17:5-10; etc.).

Satan had crucified Jesus by the hands of the Jews and Romans in Jerusalem, only to find out that this was part of God’s eternal plan (Acts 2:23-24)! Having been thoroughly outfoxed and defeated, Satan turned his rage and fury upon the young church as he attempted to destroy it by persecution (Acts 7:54-59; 8:1-3). Once again Satan learned that deep conviction cannot be rooted out of the heart by either physical suffering or death (Rom. 8:35-37). The blood of Christian martyrs became the lasting seed that furthered Christ’s church!

In Thessalonica, Paul referenced the physical suffering of the Christians in that city and compared it to what the Lord and the Judean Christians suffered: “For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men” (1 Thess. 2:14-15). We must realize that there exist in the world many men who are simply mean and wicked, and who willingly do the Devil’s bidding. God will punish them in due time (1 Thess. 2:16).

The Hebrew letter was written to encourage Jewish Christians not to give up the Faith under difficult times. To them it was written “But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward” (Heb. 10:32-35). Judean Christians suffered reproaches, tribulations, and the sad experience of seeing fellow brethren persecuted. They gladly gave up their physical possessions in the conflict, knowing that their heavenly reward was better.

The apostle Peter spoke of an impending period of persecution and warned “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy” (1 Pet. 4:12-13). Thus Peter brings the topic full circle around to the comments of Jesus -- they persecuted and killed Me, they will persecute and kill you!

So why must this be so? Why must the godly in Christ Jesus suffer persecution (1 Tim. 3:12)? The answer is found in John 15 as well. The worldly mindset is opposed to the spiritual mindset! “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (Jn. 15:18-19). The world has a mind that is contrary to God (1 Jn. 2:15). It lives for self, it lives for the present, it craves lustful satisfaction, it hates any restriction or confinement, and it rebels at any authority (Rom. 1:18; 1 Thess. 2:16). Jude 10-13 describes them best. Read those four verses and consider! The mind of the world even concocts false religion to dispel belief in the true gospel (2 Cor. 4:4; 2 Pet. 2:1-3).

Christians today can expect persecution, too. It may only be insulting remarks, or snide comments. There may be taunting and dismissive comments at school or at work. But never get too comfortable in this life because it is a hostile environment to Christianity.

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