

Must Christians be Persecuted?

*“All that will live
godly in Christ
Jesus shall suffer
persecution.”*

—II Timothy 3:12

THE TRUTH OF THE GOS-
pel message, God’s great
plan for human salvation,
has never been popular in
the world. Jesus, the central
figure in this glorious kingdom message, the one
who brought “life and immortality to light through
the gospel” (II Tim. 1:10), was crucified because he
proclaimed unpopular truth and exposed popular
error. Some of his apostles and others in the Early
Church suffered violent deaths, and for the most
part all the early Christians were bitterly opposed
by unbelieving Jews of that time, as well as by
Gentiles.

Throughout the entire Gospel Age, there have
been many martyrs to the Truth. Some have been
burned at the stake. Others have suffered many
cruel forms of physical torture and death. Imprisonment
has been the lot of many. The experiences
of all these have been quite in harmony with the
terms of the “narrow” way of sacrifice which Jesus
outlined for his disciples, when he said, “If any

man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.”—Matt. 7:14; 16:24

Jesus also said, “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33) As appraised by human wisdom, it would seem that the world had overcome Jesus. He was cruelly put to death by self-seeking human elements of the religious world of his day. However, in this experience Jesus was the real overcomer. Because he knew it was his Father’s will that he should die as the Redeemer of the fallen and dying race, he meekly surrendered to his enemies, and continued to love them even though they put him to death.

Just as during the age many of the faithful followers of the Master were persecuted, so also during the present harvest period at the end of this Gospel Age, those who have espoused the cause of truth, and who have faithfully let their light shine, have often found themselves the targets of those who, under the influence of the “god of this world,” hate the light, and therefore oppose the light bearers.—II Cor. 4:4

However, to a considerable extent, with some notable exceptions, the position of religious leaders in the world has changed during the last sixty to seventy years. While some fundamentalist groups of professed Christians, as well as some non-Christian groups, are quite outspoken in their opposition to present truth as presented in the Scriptures, the modernistic attitude has become one largely of indifference to doctrinal viewpoints. The idea of religious liberty and tolerance is stressed so much

in our day by many of the major groups of churchianity that it has led to a large degree of freedom from persecution for those who are actively engaged in proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom.

Through our contacts with the Lord's people in many parts of the world, we have perhaps found that some are wondering just where we stand today with respect to the matter of being persecuted. If those who live godly in Christ Jesus must inevitably suffer persecution, are we not lacking this witness of the Spirit if we are not being persecuted? We may find that on the part of some there is even a desire to make our message a little more radical—perhaps of a “smiting” nature—in order to draw persecution upon ourselves.

This surely is a matter for serious consideration. It would be tragic indeed should the Lord's people today be refraining from letting their light shine in the manner enjoined upon them in the Scriptures, and because of this, discover later that this was the reason for escaping the bitter persecution which in former days came upon other followers of the Master. It is important, therefore, that we examine our position carefully, for the purpose of ascertaining whether or not the present lull in bitter opposition against the Truth on a wide scale is necessarily out of keeping with what we should expect, or is an evidence of a lack of faithfulness on the part of the consecrated in letting their light shine.

LOOKING AT THE PAST

It is true that Jesus, the Captain of our salvation, was bitterly persecuted and finally put to death upon the cross by those who hated the light of the

Gospel which he proclaimed. Yet, there were times during his ministry when he experienced comparative quiet and peace. He was not always being attacked, and on many occasions the opposition leveled against him was merely in the nature of word battles. The Lord's people today who are faithfully bearing witness to the Truth frequently encounter this sort of opposition.

It was not until the Father's due time that the bitterness of Jesus' enemies was permitted to manifest itself in the death sentence which was inflicted upon him. The providence of the Lord operated in a similar manner toward the apostles and others in the Early Church. Ananias was instructed to inform Saul of Tarsus, upon his conversion, as to the great things he would suffer for the name of the Lord Jesus, and he did suffer many things. Indeed, Paul finally suffered martyrdom in a Roman prison at the hand of Nero.

Nevertheless, Paul enjoyed seasons of freedom from severe persecution. We note, for example, the time he spent in Antioch, when he and Barnabas labored together in this part of the Lord's vineyard. There is no record of special persecution during that lengthy period. Under the leadership of Paul and Barnabas, the ecclesia at Antioch prospered spiritually and increased in number. Moreover, the Lord raised up a number of able servants in Antioch, and it was decided by the congregation to send Paul and Barnabas on a missionary tour, since their services by this time could be spared in the home ecclesia.—Acts 11:25-30; 12:25; 13:1-3

On that first missionary tour they frequently found themselves in the center of a storm of

opposition. One of these occasions was at Antioch in Pisidia—a different city from the aforementioned Antioch where the ecclesia grew rapidly under the leadership of Paul and Barnabas. These manifestations of hatred toward the Truth, however, did not seriously interfere with the proclamation of the message.

The record informs us in connection with Paul's ministry in Corinth that the Lord especially protected him from "hurt." In a vision, Jesus said to Paul, "Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city." (Acts 18:9,10) The desire to persecute Paul was in the hearts of many in Corinth. In fact, they called the apostle before the deputy in charge, so that he would be punished, but the case was dismissed.

"I have much people in this city," the Lord told Paul. In other words, there was a work to be accomplished in Corinth which would have been greatly hindered had the prejudices of the people been permitted to operate in outward and violent attacks against God's servants. This brings before us a very important consideration in connection with the Heavenly Father's dealings with his people. It reveals that while, at times, he may permit persecution in severe form to come upon them, at other times he provides freedom from such occurrences because he has a certain work to be accomplished which can best be done while his people experience a measure of peace.

Brethren in the Early Church recognized this. Paul wrote to Timothy, saying, "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions,

and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty." (I Tim. 2:1,2) Paul recognized that it was the Lord's will for his people at this time to be free from severe persecution. The apostle would not have recommended a prayer to this end had it been contrary to God's will.

Those of the Lord's consecrated people who have been called upon to endure persecution because of their faithfulness have not always experienced the same degree of suffering. In Hebrews 10:33, the apostle speaks of those who were made "a gazing-stock," and also those who "became the companions of them that were so used." This was based on the principle that when one member of the body suffers, they all suffer.—I Cor. 12:26

Even today, while the members of the body of Christ in many parts of the world are enjoying a period of comparative freedom from persecution, there are still brethren in certain countries who are much more apt to experience severe suffering because of the Truth. We may not have much opportunity, except through prayer, to manifest our sympathy toward these dear ones, yet if our sympathy is genuine we will be counted as "companions of them" in these experiences.

On the whole, at the present time the Lord's people are remarkably free from physical persecution. However, there is no need to conclude that this is due to lack of faithfulness in proclaiming the Truth. Neither is it necessary to wonder whether or not the Lord's people have been sufficiently outspoken, or forthright, in their manner of witnessing. The

real reason is, we believe, that God has a work to be accomplished through a widespread witness of the Truth which could not be done if he permitted the forces of opposition to have their way. Jesus said emphatically, "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations."—Matt. 24:14

Just as the Lord held back the opposition in Corinth because he had "much people" in that city to be reached by the brethren, and just as Paul recognized the need of the consecrated at times to have peace, and recommended prayers to this end, so now the brethren seem to be in one of those periods. The lack of bitter persecution today is not because of unfaithfulness, but to the Lord's making possible the outworking of his purposes through the united efforts of his people to herald wide the glorious Gospel of the kingdom.

It is critical, then, that we utilize our present favorable opportunities to study and meditate upon the Truth, to meet in fellowship with those of "like precious faith," and to daily apply the principles of the Truth in our lives. Let us also zealously use every privilege we have of proclaiming "good tidings of good." (Isa. 52:7) If we do this, we will find that even now, in this time of less open persecution, the Truth is not popular and mostly ignored, if not scoffed at.

Indeed, even in this time the Lord's people have to endure the cold indifference of an unbelieving world. We are looked upon by many as deceivers, anti-Christian, and even members of a cult. To endure this mild opposition will help to prepare us for greater opposition later if, or when, it comes.

Certainly, if we are not faithful now when the cost of discipleship in terms of persecution may not be as high as it has been during other periods of the age, we would not be faithful if called upon to endure the fiery flames of persecution.

The truth of the matter is that we do not know exactly what the future may hold for the consecrated, as the present Time of Trouble becomes more and more severe upon the world. Whether increased—even physical—persecution will come to the remaining members of the body of Christ dwelling on this side of the veil, we cannot say with surety. However, if our characters are properly prepared, we should be able to say with Paul that nothing can “separate us from the love of Christ,” whether it be “tribulation, or distress, or persecution, . . . or sword.”—Rom. 8:35-37

Let us not forget that although he had quiet periods of activity in the service of the Lord, Paul was persecuted in many ways. He was stoned, imprisoned, and finally martyred, but he was not harmed as a New Creature. His life, and all its interests, were “hid with Christ in God.” (Col. 3:3) Knowing this, shortly before his execution he wrote, “Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.”—II Tim. 4:8

We do not, like Paul, have to fight with “beasts at Ephesus.” (I Cor. 15:32) However, we do war against our bitter, and sometimes “bestly,” enemies—the world, the flesh, and the Devil. Yet, no matter how severe the battle rages, our life as a

New Creature is “hid with Christ,” as Paul’s was, and we are protected so that no harm can come to our spiritual life. Our outward man may perish, and the things of earth which the flesh is so prone to cling to may one after another slip away. What does this matter, however, if we are setting our affections on things above?

If we are “risen with Christ,” we will, Paul says, “seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.” (Col. 3:1) We will long to be in our heavenly home, a “house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. (II Cor. 5:1) Let us have increased faith, which will enable us to lay hold of these heavenly treasures with a firmer grip as the days go by, and may our appreciation of “things . . . above” increase as faith’s vision becomes more keen.

We should even more fully determine that our “light affliction, which is but for a moment,” will continue to work for us “a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (II Cor. 4:17,18) Truly, the prospect before us is glorious and transporting! Therefore, let us “give diligence” to make our “calling and election sure” that, in the Lord’s due time, this hope may mature into the actual and eternal glory of the “everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”—II Pet. 1:4-11 ■

*“Therefore we both labour and suffer reproach,
because we trust in the living God.”
—I Timothy 4:10*