

# Overview of Persecution

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'm going to be talking about a topic that is dear to my heart, perhaps dear to many of you, if not all of you.

! I'm going to talk for a few minutes this evening about persecution. And having served now on the Board of Directors of Voice of the Martyrs over 25 years, and been able to go to six of the seven continents and be with persecuted people, it's quite an honor for me to be here and talk about this subject.

But one thing I do want to say is probably the centerpiece in Scripture concerning persecution is found in the book of Revelation.

And you may recall there, John of course is on Patmos, and you may recall that he devoted, the Lord devoted two chapters in the book on the seven churches of Asia Minor.

Those are the churches, they're all, were located in what is modern day Turkey. Five of the seven churches receive stiff condemnation, increasingly stiff condemnation.

[ 1 : 42 ] Two of the churches receive no condemnation. One of those is the church at Philadelphia. Interesting word, comes from phileo, means I like you a whole bunch.

It's short of agape, which is sacrificial love, but it's I like you a whole lot. The city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania is named after it. I've been there, it's not.

But the other one, though, is the church at Smyrna. And that's in Turkey. And I've been to Smyrna, and I've been to the church in Smyrna.

There's still a Christian church there. And I toured it, and it's ornate and beautiful, and it is still there. This was the church that also received no condemnation, and it was the church that was having to endure severe persecution.

I want to read that section to you out of chapter 2. It's brief. And to the angel, and that's the messenger or pastor of the church in Smyrna, write, the words of the first and the last who died and came to life, I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you are rich.

[ 3 : 02 ] And the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan, do not fear what you're about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation.

Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.

If you look on a map today for Smyrna, you won't find it. It's been renamed by the Muslims. It's called Ismir. It's on the Aegean Sea, a very beautiful town.

And like I say, I was able to visit there and look around, and it was quite a moving experience for me. And so here we have the Lord talking about this church, and they received no condemnation. Why is that? Well, that's explained to us, actually in the book of Romans, chapter 8, verse 1, where it says, There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

[ 4 : 25 ] The church at Smyrna received no condemnation because it was a church made up entirely of believers, followers of Jesus Christ.

And followers of Jesus Christ, legitimate, born from above, justified, sanctified believers in Christ, received no condemnation.

Christ took our condemnation. And that was true of Smyrna. They received no condemnation because they're all believers. That's one thing that, one of the effects of persecution, though.

You end up with a smaller church, but you also end up with a church which is a more pure kernel of gold. And that was the church at Smyrna.

And Jesus says, you're rich. And it's interesting language there. He says, some of you are going to be tested, and for 10 days you will have tribulation.

[ 5 : 26 ] Volumes have been written on that. What did the Lord mean by that? And there's guys, they come way off the wall. I love what John MacArthur said. You know what that might mean? It might mean for 10 days they had tribulation.

That's what it probably means. So having started there, I saw a lot of you turning there. We're not going to be in Revelation tonight.

We're going to be everywhere else. Let me begin by saying this. Jesus has a way of saying what he means and meaning what he says.

Do we agree with that? He can say what he means and he means what he says. Try this quote and let's see if we can figure out what the Lord meant.

John 15, 18. The world is going to hate you because it hated me first.

[ 6 : 27 ] Now, we don't have to dive very deep into that to figure out what the Lord is saying there. There's no room for debate on those words.

They are about as plainly spoken as one can get. The world is going to hate us. And you know, no one likes to be hated.

No one wants to be hated. We don't go out of our way to be hated. We would never do that. But the Lord Jesus, the infinite God with infinite knowledge, says it's going to happen.

It's going to happen. Why? Because the world hates Jesus. And if the world hates Jesus, that same world is going to hate the followers of Jesus.

And remember, elsewhere the Lord said the student is not above the master teacher. However, if they refer to the master teacher as even the devil, what are they going to say about us?

[ 7 : 34 ] And trust me, there's persecution globally. People are killed every day because they won't deny Christ. Last Sunday, a Baptist church in northern New York State was under assault.

Parishoners beaten up. Kids threatened with the people wanted child welfare services to come take the kids away. Because they're being taught evangelicalism.

Taught that Jesus is the only way to eternal life. And it was part of what's going on in our country now. Just amazing. United States of America. America. And let me add something here.

I'm talking about godly, undeserved persecution that comes from being in Christ.

But there is a difference between undeserved persecution and deserved persecution. Let's face it. A person can be obnoxious and be persecuted.

[ 8 : 42 ] You can get persecuted because of your personality. But that's deserved persecution. We're not talking about that. Now, most of us in here are probably cut from the same or similar mold.

I've always had this unique ability to handle bad news. But it's the unknown that makes life difficult. Jesus wanted his disciples to know where they stood.

And so we come to the 16th chapter of John. And let's understand something. When you start in chapter 13 through chapter 17, you're only hours from the arrest and crucifixion of Christ.

He's coming down to the end. And he wants his disciples, the 11 true disciples. Judas wasn't there. He was busy betraying him. He wants them to all know where they stand.

These things I have spoken to you so that you may be kept from stumbling. They will make you outcasts from the synagogue.

[ 9 : 52 ] But an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. These things they will do because they have not known the Father or me.

But these things I have spoken to you so that when their hour comes, you may remember that I told you of them. That passage is being fulfilled even to this day.

Christians are being slaughtered all over the world. And the people that are doing the killing think they're doing God, their God, a favor.

This happens in Muslim countries. It happens in Hindu countries. It happens in other countries. Paul gives us an absolute promise. In 2 Timothy 3.16, he says this, All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

I once told a Christian brother that I didn't feel much persecuted in my Christian walk. And he said, live a godlier life and persecution will come. Well, we kind of chuckled about that a little bit.

[ 11 : 09 ] And over the years, I've thought about it and come to realize he's absolutely right. He's absolutely right. More godly you live, more persecution is going to come your way.

Now, for the present, about the only persecution we might experience living on the buckle of the Bible belt is alienation.

We could be alienated from friends or families. Perhaps, and I've known people like this, we might feel some pressure to keep silent in our secular job for fear of losing a position in the organization. Maybe lose faith socially. Obviously, this type of persecution is mild compared to what some of our brothers and sisters around the world have to endure.

And I've been with many of them on six continents, like I said. By God's grace, we in the West, and especially in America, have not yet felt the fierceness of extreme persecution common to so many fellow believers.

[ 12 : 22 ] At least not yet. At least not yet. But with the things that are happening in this world, and the things that are happening in America, I believe the outbreak of extreme and widespread persecution in America is just around the corner.

And already this year, there's been churches burned down, pastors assaulted, parishioners assaulted. So it does happen. And with those things that are happening, it is just around the corner. Persecution is coming to America. One of those that will be persecuted is Voice of the Martyrs. But churches will not be immune from this.

And I would suggest the closer a church is to the Lord, the more intense the persecution. So when persecution comes to our country and our community, how are we going to respond?

The answer to that question is really quite simple. Our individual response to persecution will determine our perspective on persecution.

[ 13 : 38 ] What do we believe about persecution? What do we know about persecution? If we view persecution from an earthly perspective, we will view it more as a hindrance to our lifestyle or perhaps to our own personal safety and growth.

I've known some churches that if they are in the least persecuted, first thing they do is go out and try to hire a lawyer. Trust me, lawyers are never the solution.

I know I worked with a lot of them. But what if we view our own persecution, not from a personal perspective, not from an earthly perspective, but from a heavenly perspective?

Let's talk about that. That changes everything, doesn't it? That changes everything. If we are able to see persecution through God's eyes and through God's perspective, we will endure and grow and, dare I say, even rejoice in the midst of it.

How could anyone rejoice in persecution? I've seen it happen. And I've had people tell me in Asia and in Africa and other places, I can't believe that I've been found worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus.

[ 15 : 08 ] That just staggers me. I've had people tell me that. I've had people say that to me. So we want to look at this from God's eyes, His perspective.

So what is the Lord's perspective on persecution? The answer might surprise us. Persecution is a trial by God for our growth.

He will grow us in the midst of persecution. That's the perspective from God on persecution. Now, can I support that statement?

I hope so, or I'll be in deep trouble. Consider what the Holy Spirit said through the Apostle James in James 1, verses 2-4. Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance, and let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

That's God's perspective. God speaks here of joy in the midst of trials, and we know joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit, don't we?

[ 16 : 35 ] Love, joy. And those words even become more meaningful when we realize they're spoken by God the Holy Spirit, who is incapable of lying.

He only tells truth. There's another point to be made here. When persecution and suffering come our way, and Scripture says it's coming, God will not be caught off guard.

He will never be caught off guard. God is never unaware. Remember this principle. God acts, but He never has to react.

Never does God react. God doesn't look down and say, I can't believe they did that.

What do I do now? God never, that's foreign to the mind of God. Not going to happen. Let me put it another way.

[ 17 : 50 ] God never goes to plan B. Beloved, there is no plan B. There's only plan A.

that the Holy Trinity came up with long before this universe was even created. Long before.

So, God is never caught unawares. Additionally, God never panics. He doesn't panic. Now, let me say to you parenthetically, if we wake up some morning and we find out that God has panicked, that's a green light.

We can go ahead and panic. But unless God panics, don't panic. And He's not going to panic. Ever. Persecution is never an indicator that God has somehow lost control of the situation.

Neither is persecution evidence that we've fallen out of favor with God or that our faith is weak and has failed us. And I'll tell you, I've known some dear, charismatic folks that will say that.

[ 19 : 09 ] Well, if you had more faith. No. No. Persecution is a trial with divine purpose in view.

It is part of God's divine plan that we can benefit from both in this life and in the next. And let me say, the people that are doing the persecuting, they're accountable to God.

God didn't say, hey, wake up early. I want you to persecute these Christians over here. God never has to do that. They're going to do it anyway. And God's very aware of that because He knows everything.

It is all part of God's divine plan that we can benefit from in this life and in the next. This again is consistent with James' words in verse 12 where he says this, blessed is the man who perseveres under trial.

Did you hear that? Blessings will accrue to the man or woman who perseveres under trial.

[ 20 : 22 ] For once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. I love the concept of crowns because we get to place them at the feet of Jesus.

Strive for crowns. That's okay. And then give them to Jesus someday. These words are consistent with the words of Peter and why wouldn't they be?

The author is the Holy Spirit and he's not the author of confusion or contradiction. In 1 Peter 4, verses 12-14, Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you which comes upon you for testing as though some strange thing were happening to you, but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing.

There's that word. Keep on rejoicing so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exaltation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

Amazing. And we need to remember that Peter was writing to an audience that was facing a fiery ordeal from one of the most anti-Christian regimes ever, the Roman Empire.

[ 22 : 02 ] They faced persecution, suffering, and death at the hands of a pagan culture. And Peter comes along and makes note of their suffering and counsels them to rejoice.

Wow, what words to give people that are in severe persecution. And he builds on that theme in chapter 1 of 1 Peter, verses 6 and 7, in this you greatly rejoice even though for now a little while if necessary you have become distressed by various trials so that the proof of your faith being more precious than gold which is perishable even though tested by fire may be found to result what's the end result?

Praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. When he returns praise glory and honor.

Persecution is faith under fire. Nothing is more viable than to know that your faith and my faith is real.

that is very important for us to know. And if you're uncertain with that you need to do business with the Lord.

[ 23 : 39 ] You need to do business with God. We can be sure that any persecution that comes our way will do a few things in our Christian walk.

You can bank on this. it will increase our spiritual strength. It sounds like it would have the opposite but God is often the God of opposites.

He does what he desires and not what we desire or what the world desires. And it will strengthen us spiritually. Persecution will also build our assurance that we are truly one with Christ.

How do you know that? The world will hate you for my sake because it first hated me. It first hated me. I'll tell you another thing it does.

Stiff persecution will decrease church attendance. It will. people and I'm sure Smyrna went through a period where they looked around and said there's fewer and fewer people showing up on Sunday.

[ 24 : 57 ] What's going on? People will live for a lie but they won't die for one. If they're not serious about Jesus why would they hang around and be persecuted for him?

People don't have a tendency to do that. I heard Dr. MacArthur one time say I've never prayed for persecution but sometimes I'm tempted to because persecution burns off the dross. You know that's in the process to purify gold. It burns off the dross. The dross flees. The dross flees.

But I'll tell you that in the days of severe persecution there's going to be church people that'll leave the church and when the authorities come they'll say I know where they hang out kind of like Judas I know where they're at right now it will happen.

And another thing it does in our Christian walk it invigorates us to contemplate future glory in heaven with Christ where there is stored up for us a crown of life.

[ 26 : 12 ] And I'll tell you there is a special place in the heart of the triune God Father Son and Holy Spirit for people who have suffered persecution over the millennia for his name.

Even now remember there's people under the altar and there'll be even more crying out saying you know how long Lord you know we paid with our lives how long before you come down and make this right and he will make it right and there they receive a crown of life just amazing to me.

Well you know last words are important words all of these words beginning in chapter 13 through 17 are some of the last words of our Lord there'll be some more last words when he hung on the cross of course but last words are really important words and here's some last words that Jesus gave to his followers and threw them to us John 16 33 these things I have spoken to you so that in me you may have peace and we do have peace that surpasses understanding in the world you will have tribulation but take courage I have overcome the world you know I did something years ago I probably shouldn't have done I skipped forward and read the end of the book Jesus wins if you haven't got to the end of the book Jesus wins my dad got

God help him he used to he'd buy five or six novels and he'd go home and he'd read the last four pages and I'd say dad why do you do that he said I want to see who to focus on when I'm reading the novel I want to make sure they're still alive at the end of the book that was my dad Diane can tell you volumes about him and other Holland's persecution is coming to our land in many respects it's already here it's already here I think back of members of this church have gone on before us and they probably wouldn't believe the things that are going on today in our country many of them World War II veterans I think of an AC pitch for the Lloyd Schnitzer Tom Ferris these guys fought in World War II they wouldn't believe how far we've come but it's coming we can be at peace and that's the peace that surpasses understanding when we adopt

God's perspective on the persecution of his beloved children Christ has overcome the world let that be the beginning point of our perspective on persecution you know I've been in a lot of the persecuted countries I've met in secret in the underground churches of Asia and other places churches and it was real interesting more than one country more than one culture I would meet and they would say to me is the church in America praying for us how do we answer that how do we answer that maybe we need to be thinking more about that maybe a more of a systematic approach to praying for the persecuted and we've got a resource out here at

[ 30 : 01 ] Voice of the Martyrs they can give us all kinds of prayer requests but I've had them ask me is the church in America praying for us and then they will say we sure are praying for you and more than once in China in Vietnam in Turkey in other countries I've had them say how do you guys do it in America how do you handle the intense persecution that you're under well you know I'm kind of dumbfounded and I'll say well could you explain that a little further and they said all of them in those different countries they didn't know each other they didn't speak their language the persecution of materialism that's what all of them said the persecution of materialism you guys in America are so successful everyone views Americans as rich everyone and let me tell you the poorest people in

America are like in the top 2% in the world financially it's amazing but true and they say but how do you overcome the persecution of materialism people make money they buy a house on the lake they buy a boat they buy a log cabin in the woods and you never see them again that was their definition of American persecution that was their definition and I just sat there and took it in and tried to learn from it tried to learn from it Thank you.