

Down-to-Earth Persecution

By Nathan Warner

“You also will bear witness because you have been with Me from the beginning.”
(John 15:27)

For the Church, persecution is always on the mind. What exactly persecution means to our minds, however, has perhaps become a bit limited. We in the West have had a tendency to think of persecution as something that persists primarily beyond the shores of America in the beatings, imprisonments, and killings of Believers in dark alleyways and mob-filled squares of third-world countries. Recently, Believers have increasingly felt this form of persecution coming to America on the tidal wave of these End Days. Indeed, in the traditional sense, it is most certainly on the rise with increased anger and violence towards Believers.

Persecution of Christians, however, is far more commonplace and monotonous than we might otherwise think. We wade through it every day of our existence here in the world. Part of our difficulty in recognizing it is because we define it as a sort of opposition purely to discipleship and outreach activities. In this way, we think of preachers and missionaries being ridiculed, harassed, attacked, arrested, beaten, or killed. Indeed, we see similar stories in the Acts of the Apostles.

As Believers, we have a tendency to idolize Believers who have faced this sort of persecution. These are the “great men” and “giants” of the Faith who did great works and endured great trials “worthy” of some mention. Unfortunately, one might get the impression from these discussions that greatness in the Kingdom of God only relates to our efforts in spreading the Gospel, measured by how much persecution we overcome in doing so. And so we collect stories of missionaries and preachers who became famous for their efforts to spread the Gospel in the world.

I projected a lot of judgment on myself growing up, because I wasn’t sure I was “good enough” or that I measured up in my daily life. After all, who was I compared to Eric Liddell or Amy Carmichael? Are we second-rate Christians in the Kingdom of Heaven if we lead “ordinary” lives? The truth is there is nothing ordinary about life as a Christian. To live a Christian life is to be persecuted by the world and its ruler (John 14:30) no matter where you are or what you are doing.

We can see this clearly if we define Persecution more broadly as anything in our lives that challenges, harasses, and oppresses the reality of who God is. Now we may see that we are surrounded by persecution. Persecution is not simply the mockers and haters of God doing violence to us but it is also in the pain, sorrow, and loss in our lives that may question our understanding of God’s character or make us feel neglected, judged, or rejected by God. In this way, persecution is not only a physical crackdown on what we can say and do in our testimony about Jesus but also spiritual distress born from the death, pain, struggle, frustration, oppression, and loss we experience in life. This shouldn’t be surprising because as Believers our very lives are testimonies for Christ.

The very nature and presence of sin in this world persecutes belief in God. The things we see and hear and feel from the world persecute and harass our spirits, grieving the Holy Spirit in us: *“Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits*

the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:29-30). Persecution is anything that tries to oppress, harass, or silence our testimony – anything that challenges the reality of WHO GOD IS. Have you ever been in pain or been with someone else in pain? Have you ever suffered a terrible loss or something terrible happened in your life, and it made you ask, “God, where are you? Why me? I don’t understand!” Have you ever had something challenge your understanding of who God is? Has anything troubled your faith in God’s character? This is persecution of the most acute kind.

If you have ever wondered why we are persecuted, we see why in John 15:18-27. **We testify about God’s nature, therefore even our understanding of His nature is always under attack.** We see here that it is because Jesus witnessed to God’s true nature, contrasting the world’s ways to God’s Holiness that they hated Him for it. He bore witness to God’s character. The Holy Spirit bears witness to the world and to us about Jesus. If we are true Believers and followers in Jesus, we bear witness about Jesus, too. If we are Believers, our very lives are testimonies to God’s character; therefore, the world hates everything we say, everything we do, and everything we are. The Enemy hates the very essence of our lives and seeks to persecute our understanding of God in our pain, discouragement, frustration, sorrow, and loss. Truly, there is much persecution in our lives as Christians. We should take heart, however, for our sorrow will be turned to Joy.

As an illustration of persecution, Jesus compared our lives on earth to childbirth: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you”* (John 16:20-22). We must understand that if we are true Believers, this is a picture of how life will be. There will be great sorrow on account of our witness about Jesus – great pain and anguish – great persecution. Not just in our testifying to people but in our testimony through physical and emotional pain, our struggles with discouragement and depression, how we are ravished with loss and our struggles with weakness and shame – all persecution in a depraved world because God’s Holy presence does not fill this place. Jesus said we would be wracked with the pains of childbirth while living here.

Childbirth is not something you can control. You have to go through it - every discomfort, every twinge, leading step by step towards the intense pain and anguish in the final stages. So it is with us as Believers in this life. As we struggle helplessly, cry without comfort, and scream in agony through a world ravished by sin, we are nearing the hour, every hour that passes, to the moment when we will be delivered of the agony – We WILL BE DELIVERED! Jesus will see us again! Jesus said, *“Unless one is **born again**, he cannot see the Kingdom of Heaven”* (John 3:3b). We who are Believers are said to be Born Again, yet the physical manifestation of that transformation in our bodies (eternal life) remains ahead of us; but from the perspective of a timeless God, we have already been Born Again if we are His. If we are His, then it simply IS the reality of what we are, because we will be with Him in eternity – it is the end and everlasting result of this birthing called “life” here in the world. The eternal life that fills our hearts by the testimony of Jesus through the Holy Spirit will birth us into the Kingdom of Heaven. We will be born into eternity, whether by death or by the Rapture. We will not remember or know the anguish for Joy that we are with the Lord at that moment. We will ask Him nothing in that day,

because we will not think of the anguish for the Joy at being in His presence! And no one will take our joy from us.

Our persecution in this life is a sure thing, but it works step by step towards eternal Life born in us by the power of God, and no one will take our joy from us.

“I have said these things to you, that in Me you might have peace. In the world you will have tribulation, but take heart, I have overcome the World.”

(John 16:33)