

Persecution Is What We Signed Up For

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Over the past several weeks, I've received emails and phone calls from people around the country and they've commented about the persecution that they are receiving for knowing the truth and understanding the truth—believing the truth about God and Christ and the record of scripture. They receive condemnation from those who put church tradition ahead of what the Bible says. Because they are loyal to the Bible and what they see in the Bible, they have received persecution and condemnation.

We know in Satan's world, no good deed goes unpunished. That's just the way it is in Satan's world. He wants to persecute God's children. He hates God's children. He wants to make our life as difficult as possible. When Christ walked the earth, the Messiah suffered persecution from the moment He began to speak. As soon as He talked about the truth about His Father, about Himself, and about the record of scripture—what we know of as the Old Testament, at that time—He began to be persecuted. Let's go to John 7:19. I'll be reading out of the King James unless otherwise noted. We talked about this scripture last week in the context of the Pharisees, but notice what people said about the Messiah standing right in front of them.

John 7:19 *Did not Moses give you the law, and yet none of you keepeth the law? Why go ye about to kill me?* [Notice the response.]
20) *The people answered and said, Thou hast a devil [the margin in the King James says, you have a demon]: who goeth about to kill thee?* (KJV)

Christ knew they were plotting to kill Him; they knew they were plotting to kill Him and yet they would not admit it; they lied about it. Yet they accused Him of having a demon. Now look at John 10—this is the parable of the sheepfold. Christ is contrasting Himself with Satan in this parable.

John 10:10 *The thief [referring to Satan] cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy [all of us—all of those who believe in God and worship God]: I am come [in contrast, Christ is saying] that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.* (KJV)

The Greek means beyond measure. God wants those whom He calls and gives to Christ to have life beyond measure. Verse 11.

- 11) *I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.*
- 12) *But he that is a hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep.*
- 13) *The hireling fleeth, because he is a hireling, and careth not for the sheep.*

- 14) *I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine.*
 15) *As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep.*
 16) [And about us, He says] *And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall [looking into the future] hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.*
 17) *Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. (KJV)*

The same applies to us; God loves us even more when we are willing to lay down our lives to sacrifice our lives for one another. Going on in verse 18,

- 18) *No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. [I do this voluntarily.] I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment [other translations say "this command"] have I received of my Father. (KJV)*

Christ gives this wonderful news that He is here to serve and to care for the sheep and He is the Good Shepherd. But notice the reaction of the Jews, verse 19.

- 19) *There was a division therefore again among the Jews for these sayings.*
 20) *And many of them said, He hath a devil, and is mad; [the margin in the King James says, He's insane; He has a demon and He's insane because He says these good things] why hear ye him? (KJV)*

They go on to say, why do you even bother listening to this man? So the persecution follows everywhere Christ went, just about every time He spoke. When we follow in Christ's footsteps, we will receive and do receive the same persecution that He did. Let's go to 1 Peter 2:19. The apostles knew of the persecution; they were persecuted every time they turned around. Notice what Peter has to say about the fact that we follow in Christ's footsteps, therefore persecution follows us.

- 1 Peter 2:19** *For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. (KJV)*

Meaning he's not suffering for something bad he did, but suffering wrongfully.

- 20) *For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God.*
 21) [Notice this] *For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: (KJV)*

The steps we follow, if we put God first and follow the example of Jesus Christ, persecution is sure to follow.

- 22) [Referring to Christ] *Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth:*

23) *Who, when he was reviled, [notice His reactions] reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him [God the Father, His Father] that judgeth righteously: (KJV)*

Persecution, whether we knew it or not at the time of baptism, is something we signed up for. If we were counseled properly for baptism, we would have been told to go to Luke 14 about counting the cost. We're told that a man is not going to build a tower or a building unless he counts the cost. A king doesn't go to war unless he counts the cost of his strength versus the enemy's strength, and we should have counted the cost and we should have understood, if we read the scriptures, that persecution would follow. That's part of what we signed up for, whether we knew it or not at the time. So the title of the sermon is:

Persecution Is What We Signed Up For

We're going to explore that today and look at it and see that we shouldn't be surprised about it. Point number one, it's obvious really:

1. We will be persecuted when we put God first.

I remember when two members—two women—first started attending with us. They left another group and we were discussing the fact that we were getting some missiles, so to speak, hurled our way, and one of the women said, you know, if we didn't believe the truth, if we believed in error, then Satan wouldn't need to persecute us because he already has us. But if we are following God, and putting God first and putting the truth first, then persecution will come, because, if we're off track, there's no need for persecution. The skids would be perfectly greased to send us in the wrong direction, so we shouldn't be surprised about it. The fact is, when we knowingly, consciously, put God first, then we know—or should know—that Satan will do everything in his power to derail us, including bringing on persecution.

God allows Satan certain leeway. Satan can't do anything he wants, otherwise we wouldn't be here, we would be dead. Satan can't do anything he wants so God puts a leash on him and allows Satan leeway up to whatever limit God says. Sometimes God allows Satan—as we're going to see—a little more leeway to see, as a test for us, whether we will continue to put God first, even in the face of persecution, or whether we will cave in to persecution. Let's turn to Acts 6 and we want to look at the example of Stephen. Stephen was a deacon who spoke very powerfully. God was with this young man. We're going to skip over a lot of the account but there are some points upon which we need to pause and reflect.

Acts 6:8 *And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.*

9) [Because he did that] *Then there arose certain of the synagogue, [meaning of the Jews] which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and*

Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen. [He had a lot of opposition.]

10) *And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake. (KJV)*

He had God's power behind him, he had the scriptures behind him.

11) [Notice their reaction, notice what they did] *Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God. (KJV)*

The point is, when the opposition cannot argue through the scriptures, guess what they do? They attack the character of the one bringing the truth because they can't argue through the word of God.

12) *And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council ... (KJV)*

They dragged him to the council.

13) [Notice what they did] *And set up false witnesses [because they couldn't argue with the truth],*

They set up false witnesses just as they did with Jesus Christ.

13 continued) *... which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:*

14) *For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us. (KJV)*

He is going to change our church tradition and we can't have that. So they attack with lies and with falsehoods.

15) *And all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, [this is a miracle from God] saw his face as it had been the face of an angel. (KJV)*

We're not given any details but I've always wondered—remember when Moses went up to the mountain and came back down, and his face was glowing, and he had to put a veil in front of his face? It makes you wonder if maybe that happened, that while Stephen was in their midst, all of a sudden his face miraculously started to glow, as a witness against them. That's just my speculation. Going on to chapter 7, verse 1. There was a witness, there was a sign, even after that.

Acts 7:1 *Then said the high priest, Are these things so? [To Stephen] (KJV)*

In verse 2, Stephen begins a history lesson for all those present.

2) *And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, [we're going to see who this God of glory is in just a minute because Stephen goes on to talk about it] when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran ... (KJV)*

In verses 3-17, Stephen recounts how God dealt with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—Jacob being sold into slavery into Egypt, and then in verses 18-28, the account of Moses being brought into Pharaoh's house, and then in verse 29, Moses is on the run after killing a man.

29) *Then fled Moses at this saying, and was a stranger in the land of Midian, where he begat two sons.*

30) *And when forty years were expired, there appeared to him in the wilderness of mount Sinai an angel of the Lord in a flame of fire in a bush.*

31) *When Moses saw it, he wondered at the sight: and as he drew near to behold it, the voice of the LORD [Yehovah] came unto him,*

32) *Saying, I am the God of thy fathers, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. (KJV)*

Acts 3:13, covered last week, tells us very clearly that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is God the Father.

32 continued) ... *Then Moses trembled, [the King James says] and durst not behold.*

Meaning he just couldn't look at this; it was so glorious—so powerful.

33) *Then said the Lord to him, Put off thy shoes from thy feet: for the place where thou standest is holy ground. (KJV)*

God was there. Verse 34, Stephen now quotes God, saying:

34) *I have seen, I have seen the affliction of my people which is in Egypt, and I have heard their groaning, and am come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send thee into Egypt. (KJV)*

Verses 35-50 is the account of Israel coming out of Egypt, Israel's rebellion, and then Stephen brings the story down to Solomon. Now Stephen stops the history lesson, and notice verse 51; now he turns it to them who were listening—to the council, to the high priest, all of the Pharisees, the Sadducees:

51) *Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. (KJV)*

Can you imagine the reaction? Can you imagine what was going through their minds?

52) *Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? (KJV)*

God's people, those who bring the truth, have been persecuted down through the millennia, he's saying.

52 continued) *... and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers:*

53) *Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it. (KJV)*

It's the same condemnation that Christ gave to the Pharisees. Look at their reaction in verse 54. Repentance? Sorrow? Examination of the self? No.

54) *When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. (KJV)*

I remember as little children—sometimes small children get into a flaming argument, and one child will just take the other's arm and bite it. They just get so angry that they do something like that; this is exactly what happened. One of Satan's characteristics is that he walks around seeking whom he may devour—1 Peter 5:8. So this behavior is coming from Satan; it is not godly behavior, obviously. Verse 55.

55) *But he [Stephen], being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, [which he had been talking about previously] and Jesus standing on the right hand of God [whom he had talked about previously],*

56) *And said, Behold, [he's saying to these people that just want to devour him—can you imagine how they receive this?] I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.*

57) *Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord ... (KJV)*

And what did they do? They put their hands over their ears. They did not want to hear anything that this man had to say. They didn't want to hear the truth. That is exactly opposite of the example of the Bereans. Remember when Paul came to Berea, in Acts 17 (we won't turn there), and they listened to Paul with a ready mind? These people, the religious leaders, plugged their ears and didn't want to hear a word. Didn't want to hear a word. Notice what they did in verse 58.

58) *And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul [or Paul]. (KJV)*

Paul must have been in charge otherwise why would they lay Stephen's clothes at Paul's feet? He obviously had a hand in that. So we see here that Stephen paid the ultimate price—paid the ultimate price in putting God first. He told them the Messiah

had come and they killed him. He told them that God the Father sent Jesus Christ to do that, and you killed His Son. What Stephen preached was heresy to the religious leaders of the day. It countered their tradition and they just wouldn't stand for it, and look at the price that Stephen paid. What we preach today is heresy to some religious leaders, and Satan wants those whom God has called to worship anything but the One who called them—God the Father. That is his desire.

That leads to the next point, point 2.

2. Persecution will come from within the church.

When I came into the church in the mid '60s we always thought, or were taught, anyway, that persecution would come from the outside. It would come from our own government, it would come from other religions, it would come from the beast or the false prophet, and we thought that things were going to wind up in the early 1970's (if you were around in those days).

Let me give you an example. I was an officer in the air force—a lieutenant—up on the Canadian border in the upper peninsula of Michigan. I found out the nearest church was down in Midland, Michigan, so every Friday afternoon, as soon as I could get off duty, I jumped in the car and drove 240 miles directly south to Midland, where services were. Then I drove east to a little town in the thumb of Michigan and spent the night with a deacon and his wife and their young son.

They were kind enough to put me up and I spent Friday night; we went to services then Saturday night, and on Sunday morning we went to Spokesman's Club, and then I turned around and went back. I did this for over a year, in part to get away from the airbase in case we had an alert, but also because I wanted to learn everything that I could. I remember they would hold dinner, and once I got there we would have dinner, and then afterwards we would listen to The World Tomorrow broadcast. Back then with all the clear-channel radio stations in Mexico and several in the United States, you could hear the World Tomorrow every half hour from six in the evening until midnight—even longer in some cases.

So we're listening in their living room and had the radio on, listening to the broadcast, and the telephone rang. It was in the other room so the deacon went to the other room to answer the phone, and his wife quickly came and turned the radio down so you couldn't hear it. It wasn't affecting him talking in the other room. So after the phone conversation was over, I asked him, why did you turn the radio down? They both said, we don't want people to know that we listen to this broadcast because we could be persecuted for that and they could come after us. That was the fear back then, that the persecution would come from the outside—that it was only a matter of time before the government was going to get us, or somebody was going to get us for what we believed. But scriptures tell us, when we look at them very closely, that much persecution will come from the inside, not the outside.

We've already seen how the Jewish leaders—the Pharisees and Sadducees—treated Jesus Christ and what they did to Stephen. This was from the religion they grew up in so that was from their inside. Now let's look at some examples of what the Jews—the religious leaders—did to the apostles after Christ's murder and death. Acts 8:1—this is right after the death of Stephen and we see what Paul's involvement was.

Acts 8:1 *And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church [from the Jews, Paul being a part of it] which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles. (KJV)*

So the persecution from the Jews was so great that the Christians in Jerusalem had to leave—they had to go somewhere else. Go to Acts 13 and we'll read verse 50. The setting is Antioch, which is in modern-day Turkey. This is a good way from Jerusalem but notice the influence.

Acts 13:50 *But the Jews stirred up the devout and honourable women, and the chief men of the city, and raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them out of their coasts. (KJV)*

This persecution came from the inside—their inside—from the Jews. Now let's go to 1 Thessalonians 2:14. We know Paul wrote this letter to the church in Thessalonica, which is in modern-day Greece.

1 Thessalonians 2:14 *For ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus: [so they followed in the footsteps of the churches in Judea] for ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews:*

The churches in Judea suffered from the Jews.

15) Who both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men: (KJV)

They were not godly in the slightest. We know that Paul, prior to his conversion on the road to Damascus, led the persecution. Let's go to Acts 22:4, and we'll just read the one verse. Paul is speaking about his previous conduct.

Acts 22:4 *And I persecuted this way [meaning it's a way of life] unto the death, [he caused people to die] binding and delivering into prisons both men and women. (KJV)*

Persecutions from the inside. Look at chapter 26:11; Paul is speaking again about his conduct. I'll read this out of the New King James.

Acts 26:11 [Paul says] *And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; [does that mean he allowed torture, so that they would, ultimately, in enough pain, blaspheme?] and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.* (NKJV)

He's saying, I went out and sought them wherever I could, and I persecuted them. Let's go to Galatians 1:13, one final scripture about Paul's involvement. We'll just read this one verse out of the New King James. Notice the vehemence of his persecution and he admits it. He is just opening himself up to what he had done previously.

Galatians 1:13 *For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it.* (NKJV)

Remember, Paul was a Pharisee of the Pharisees—we find that out in Acts 23. He was zealous and he went after the church with abandon—with no restraints—and he had the backing of the highest religious leaders in the land. Persecution came from the religion that the early church converts came out of. That was their religion, that's what they came out of, and those very people persecuted them.

Now let's notice a prophecy for our day also. It was for that time and for us today. Let's go to John 16; this is Christ's last night on earth before He was taken captive. He is warning the disciples because there was some trouble coming. They had not a clue the depth or the extent of the trouble.

John 16:1 *These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended.* (KJV)

In the first part of verse 2, He says:

2) They shall put you out of the synagogues: (KJV)

Remember, the Holy Spirit hadn't come yet, the New Testament church hadn't been founded yet, so Christ was looking forward to this—so there is coming a day that anybody who believes the truth is going to be put out of their places of worship. We have to ask the question: Why would it be any different for us today? Why would it be any different? It happened then, and when Christ said they shall put you out of the synagogues, if you apply it today, they shall disfellowship you or shun you or turn their backs on you or refuse to communicate with you—why should we be surprised? Going on in verse 2,

2 continued) ... yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. (KJV)

If they think they do God service, then they must be “religious”, meaning they're killing people in the name of their religion, thinking they are doing God a service. You can kill

people physically but you can also kill people's reputation by slander and by falsehoods and by lies.

3) *And these things will they do [He's looking into the future—will they do] unto you, [why?] because they have not known the Father, nor me. (KJV)*

What a condemnation. They do this because they really don't know who I am, God is saying, and Christ is saying, they don't know who I am. The true God and His Son, Jesus Christ. The key is, we'd better know God and we'd better know Jesus Christ. Yet there are some today who stop their ears and they just don't want to know. They run in circles with their hands over their ears, screaming and yelling, because they don't want to know. We see in this first point that persecution begins from within. And similarly today, persecution, slander, lies, and misrepresentation come from other churches of God against those who do their very best, with God's inspiration, to teach and preach the truth. If we are honest with ourselves, I think most of us would admit we have been treated far worse by people inside the church than outside the church. I know that's true for the ministry and I know it's true for most of you. We've been treated far worse by people who claim to be of the truth.

That leads us to the third point.

3. Satan will use this persecution to turn us from God.

He will ratchet up the persecution to the point that he hopes and desire and wants to get us off track. Who is the one behind the persecution of the saints? Who is the accuser of the brethren, day and night? Let's go to Revelation 12:9. I know we are very familiar with this but think about the effort, the on-going, non-stop effort, of our adversary to bring us down through persecution—one of the tools he uses.

Revelation 12:9 *And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, [no doubt about whom God is describing here] which deceiveth the whole world [not part of it, but all of it]: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.*

10) *And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: (KJV)*

We don't think this has happened yet, but it's in the not-too-distant future. Notice the description of what Satan does.

10 continued) *... for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them [the saints, those whom God has called] before our God day and night. (KJV)*

Some people have said that God can't be around evil—it's impossible. Okay, then explain this, because Satan is in God's presence, accusing God's children, day and night, before the Father. Satan is our accuser. What is his goal? We read it in the

parable of the sheepfold in John 10:10: To kill, physically, if he can, to steal us away from God and the truth, and to destroy—meaning, to destroy us spiritually, so that we cease to exist. Steal, kill, destroy. Remember, we talked about it a minute ago, God allows Satan certain leeway. I think it's obvious to those who watch and to those who have had a history in God's church—a long history—that the closer we get to the end, the greater the leeway that God is allowing Satan. He does so as a test for us. Are we going to hold fast, are we going to continue to believe the truth, in spite of persecution? If things are going swimmingly, what's the big deal? Stephen had the whole council around him (they all hated him) and yet he held to the truth even at the cost of his life. So God is going to test all of us, as we go forward, by allowing Satan the leash a little bit longer, to see under persecution, if we will hold fast. Let's go to Matthew 13:1—Christ gave us a parable that pertains to this.

Matthew 13:1 *The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side.*

2) [When that came to be known] ... *great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.* (KJV)

Since God and Christ understand the laws of acoustics, He was some distance away from the shore, the water was in front of Him, and the people were standing on the shore, so He obviously knew that the water would reflect the sound of His voice and amplify it, so the people could better hear. So He was standing in a boat, in a position where they could all hear.

3) *And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow;*

4) *And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up:* (KJV)

Verse 5 is the one we want to look at.

5) *Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth:*

6) *And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.* (KJV)

Let's jump to verse 20 and I'll read this out of the New King James. Christ is explaining what He just said about the stony places.

20) *But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy [as the Bereans did];*

21) *yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while.* (NKJV)

Now look at it from God's perspective and Christ's perspective. What is "a while" to God? A couple of decades? Fifty years? That's certainly a while, so we're not talking a

day or a week or a couple of years—it can be decades. People can be in the church for decades.

21 continued) ... *For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, [what's in God's word and people teaching it and obeying it and following it] immediately he stumbles.* (NKJV)

When persecution arises. The Greek word for *stumbles* (or, *offended*, in the King James) is Strong's #4624; it's the Greek word *scandalidzo*, from which we get our English word "scandalize". It can mean to entrap, it can mean to trip up, or it can mean to entice to sin. The point Christ is making is, if our roots are not deep and firm when persecution comes—not if persecution comes, when persecution comes—if our roots are not deep and they're not firm, we will not stand. That's what Christ is saying. You have to have deep roots, firm roots, because you're going to be blown about through persecution, you're going to be tested, so make sure your roots go deep. Let's go to 1 Thessalonians 3:1; I'll read this out of the New King James, too. Paul writing to the church in Thesalonica—he is speaking to them and by extension to us today. You can see Paul's care for the church in his writing here.

1 Thessalonians 3:1 *Therefore, when we could no longer endure it ...* (NKJV)

What's he talking about? We will see in the context, he couldn't endure it not knowing the state of the church—how they were doing—because he was concerned. He wanted to know how they were doing.

1 continued) ... *we thought it good to be left in Athens alone,*
2) *and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith,*
3) [Why did he send Timothy?] *That no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this.* (NKJV)

To suffer persecution, to suffer affliction, to suffer trouble.

4) *For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation [counting the cost; knowing what's ahead], just as it happened, and you know.*
5) *For this reason, when I could no longer endure it [meaning, not knowing how they were doing], I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain.* (NKJV)

When Satan launches persecution on us and God allows it up to a certain point, up to a limit, some people may say, I didn't sign up for this—I'm out of here. I can remember in the '60s we were told bad things don't happen to good people. Bad things don't happen to God's people and the implication was we had this giant slide into the Kingdom of God, and God would put grease on the slide to make it nice and easy for us to go into the Kingdom of God—there was that feeling. If somebody ran into trouble, the rumor

would be, they must be sinning. We know today that's just not true. Satan provokes us to think, I don't need this, I didn't sign up for this, I'm out of here. As we have seen, this is what we signed up for. Counting the cost prior to baptism, if we were counseled properly, we should have covered this and had this covered in our minds. So we see that Satan uses persecution to turn us from God.

Now that leads to the fourth point.

4. What should we do when we're faced with persecution?

What do we do when we are in the midst of people attacking us, ignoring us, shunning us, or whatever form that persecution might take? Christ was very explicit about that. Let's go to Matthew 5—the sermon on the mount—the first recorded words out of His mouth. It must be very important to set the tone of His ministry and therefore we must pay very careful attention to it. Christ kept saying, you have heard it said before, but let Me tell you the way it is.

Matthew 5:38 *Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth [which is true]:*

39) But I say unto you [here is what I want you to do], That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. (KJV)

Meaning, rather than return evil for evil, you're better off turning the other cheek and taking another blow.

40) And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also.

41) And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. (KJV)

Be as cooperative as you can.

44) But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, [notice this] and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; (KJV)

It is probably the hardest thing for a converted person to do—to pray for our enemies. If somebody lies about you, slanders you, makes up stories about you as they did with Stephen, as they did with Christ, one of the hardest things to do is pray for that person and pray for God's blessings upon that person. One of God's blessings could be opening their mind to see what they just did and how wrong it was. God and Christ have told us, we're not here on the wide path, we're here to walk the narrow path, the difficult path. So loving those who persecute us is hard to do, but it is what God requires of us.

It's a wise saying indeed, that if you wrestle with a pig, you both get dirty but the pig loves it. When we fight back, we've put ourselves right in the mud with the pig. We're

getting just as dirty as the pig but the person we're wrestling with just loves it. Loves to engage, loves the fight, and Christ said, don't go there, don't do that. Rather than fighting back, we have to learn to let God fight our battles. We have to. Let's go to 2 Chronicles 20, and we're going to see an account where Jerusalem is surrounded by Moabites and Ammonites, and they don't have a hope. They just don't have a hope. Notice what God says, and if you pay attention to this, this is the same thing that Moses said just before the parting of the Red Sea. God has precedence, God is consistent.

2 Chronicles 20:5 [Jerusalem is surrounded] *And Jehoshaphat stood in the congregation of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD [Yehovah], before the new court,*

6) [He's appealing to God] *And said, O LORD God of our fathers, art not thou God in heaven? and rulest not thou over all the kingdoms of the heathen? and in thine hand is there not power and might, [you might say, all power and all might] so that none is able to withstand thee? (KJV)*

Jumping to verse 15.

15) *And he [referring to God, the one whom Jehoshaphat was praying to] said, Hearken ye, all Judah, and ye inhabitants of Jerusalem, and thou king Jehoshaphat [listen carefully], Thus saith the LORD [Yehovah, the LORD God Almighty] unto you, Be not afraid nor dismayed by reason of this great multitude; for the battle is not yours, but God's. [It's My fight, not your fight.]*

17) *Ye shall not need to fight in this battle: set yourselves, stand ye still [just what Moses said before God parted the Red Sea], and see the salvation of the LORD with you, O Judah and Jerusalem: fear not, nor be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them: for the LORD will be with you. (KJV)*

If you read the account, God caused the Moabites and the Ammonites (and the others that were with them) to fight themselves and they killed themselves off. Israel didn't have to raise a finger. The message is, like the parting of the Red Sea, we need to let God fight our battles. I can't tell you the number of times God has rescued the ministry; what we just talked about in Mark's case, this week. God has come to my rescue; He has pulled my feet out of the fire so many times, I've lost count. When we need it, He is there. When we need rescuing, He is there.

Last point—we're going to end with some good news.

5. The good news is God is always there and He will rescue us.

We're going to look at God's promises that we will be strengthened, we will be comforted during our persecution, because God is always there. He will take care of us. He always provides. Let's go to 2 Corinthians 1:3. Paul is talking about a characteristic of God that applies to this subject.

2 Corinthians 1:3 *Blessed be God, [Paul says—notice he tells us who he is referring to] even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; (KJV)*

God the Father is the God of all comfort.

4) *Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. (KJV)*

I recently heard a sermon saying that Christ was the God of comfort. We know Christ said on His last night on earth that He was going to send the Comforter, which we know is the Holy Spirit. We read right here that God the Father is the God of all comfort. Since God the Father and Jesus Christ share the same nature through the Spirit of God, yes, they are our Comforters, but to say that Christ is The God of all comfort just isn't true. It's not in scripture.

3) *Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; (KJV)*

So God provides comfort for us in our tribulations, in our struggles, in our trials. When people are throwing rocks at us, God provides us strengthening and comfort. Let's go to 2 Timothy 3:11. Paul is speaking again and notice what he says.

2 Timothy 3:11 *Persecutions, afflictions, which came unto me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra; what persecutions I endured: but out of them all the Lord delivered me. (KJV)*

Out of every one, and we know what Paul went through. Far more than what we've ever gone through up to this point.

12) *Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. (KJV)*

So we shouldn't be surprised when it comes. Paul is telling us that God delivered him out of all of them. Now let's go to 1 Corinthians 10:13—a very familiar scripture.

1 Corinthians 10:13 [Paul says] *There hath no temptation [the Greek can mean adversity; trial; trouble; tribulation; persecution] taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted [the Greek word can mean tested] above that ye are able; but will with the temptation [or the test] also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. (KJV)*

God promises that no matter what form the persecution takes or the tribulation takes, He will always provide a way out, so that we can stand up to it. He helps us and there's good news, too. God promises to take care of our persecutors so therefore vengeance

doesn't belong to us, it belongs to God. God can take care of those who persecute us far better than we can.

Let's go to 2 Thessalonians 1:3, and I'll read this out of the New King James.

2 Thessalonians 1:3 *We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other,*
4) *so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith [notice they had patience and faith] in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure ... (NKJV)*

He said, you're a model, you're an example to all the other churches, because of the persecutions you've endured with faith and patience.

5) *which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer;*
6) *since it is a righteous thing with God [notice this] to repay with tribulation those who trouble you ... (NKJV)*

God says I'm not unaware of the persecution that is thrown your way—the lies, the slander, the hypocrisy and all of that. It's a righteous thing with Me, God is saying.

7) *and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels,*
8) *in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God ... (NKJV)*

How many times has this come up? Those who do not know God are going to pay a heavy price.

7 continued) *... and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. (NKJV)*

So the point is, in this last point, God will provide for us on every level, in our persecutions, in our tribulations—that is His promise.

Let's conclude now and we'll start by looking at Paul's reaction to persecution. Since he persecuted the church, he had a taste of what he had done to God's people; God allowed him to taste that. Let's go to 2 Corinthians 12, and read one verse, verse 10. Paul had a thorn in the flesh, we know that. He had persecution upon persecution from the Jews after he was converted by God.

2 Corinthians 12:10 *Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, [from being battered] then am I strong. (KJV)*

Through God's power, he is strong. Not through himself, not through ourselves, but through God's power. Notice the promises. Go back to Matthew 5—we were there earlier. When we're in the middle of persecutions, it's good to think about these scriptures. It's very good to think about them because they are so encouraging, because we see a bigger picture than what we're going through just at that moment. Christ says, in Matthew 5, verse 10,

Matthew 5:10 *Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

11) *Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. (KJV)*

There are people preaching a false God and a false Christ. Christ is saying, take heart. Verse 12.

12) *Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. (KJV)*

And, we might add, as they persecuted Christ in a similar manner, so they persecuted the apostles.

Let's jump to chapter 10 and start in verse 22. Christ, the Messiah, says,

Matthew 10:22 *And ye shall be hated of all men [men is in italics] for my name's sake:*

That includes inside the church as well as outside the church.

22 continued) *... but he that endureth to the end [that person] shall be saved. (KJV)*

We are helped by God through the power of His Spirit, through the power of scripture to encourage us, so we can endure to the end. Now let's go to Romans 8:35, a very familiar scripture. Let's apply this in the middle of persecution, in the middle of slander or hypocrisy, or evil, untrue words.

Romans 8:35 *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or [our subject for today] persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?*

36) *As it is written [he's now referring to Psalm 44:22], For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.*

37) *Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.*

38) *For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,*

39) Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature [including Satan], shall be able to separate us from the love of God [God the Father], which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (KJV)

Nothing will separate us. In the middle of a trial or persecution or tribulation, we know that we have God's love, His concern, His promise to help at all times. Let's go to one final scripture, 2 Corinthians 1:5. Another big-view scripture, looking at the long term.

2 Corinthians 1:5 *For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us ...*

Meaning, what Christ suffered, we're going through them right now, Paul is saying, and we know what he means.

5 continued) ... so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ. (KJV)

Being comforted or consoled.

6) And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation ... (KJV)

We are afflicted to teach us lessons we need to learn, so that we can attain salvation.

6 continued) ... which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. (KJV)

God comforts us to console us during the trial, and to get our mind on the end result, which is salvation.

7) And our hope of you is steadfast, knowing, that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also [partakers] of the consolation. (KJV)

The consolation from God, the help from God, the encouragement from God—the fact that the ultimate consolation is salvation—is what we need to keep our eyes on, the salvation. God, in His love and mercy, will give us the strength and the stamina to endure the persecutions, the slanders, the lies, the rocks being thrown at us, the missiles being launched at us. He will give us the strength and the stamina to endure it, through His Spirit, through His love for us, through Christ's love for us. The goal, through all of this, is that we can enter into the Kingdom of God, being His spiritual children, forevermore.