

Are You Ready to Face Persecution?

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If you've been keeping up with the news over the last several months, you have probably been seeing, as I have, some disturbing developments around the world. Primarily in a lot of the countries that we would refer to, as church members, the descendants of Israel—Israelite descended nations today. What I am referring to is the rise of what you might call more tyrannical types of governments. In other words, these nations that have historically been free democracies where Christians for the most part have had the freedom of religion to obey God and to follow Him as they see fit, with minimal problems. A lot of these nations are becoming more and more tightly controlled and kind of tyrannical. I think Australia is probably one of the strongest examples where a lot of typical freedoms are eroding away. Even in the United States we are heading in that direction.

Many of you are probably hearing this sermon on January 15, I'm actually filming it on January 8th. The reason I mention that, is that I want to refer to yesterday, which was Friday, January 7th in the context of when I'm saying this. Yesterday, on January 7th, the U.S. Supreme Court was hearing oral arguments on the legalities of President Biden's vaccine mandates for all companies of 100 employees or more. Regardless of how you feel about the specific issue, look at the larger consequence involved. What is really at stake is the debate as to whether U.S. citizens will have the right to bodily autonomy. In other words, the right to decide for yourself what gets injected into your own body and whether it's okay for a single President today, to inject this into your body or you can't have a job. Think about the consequences, not just the specific issue at hand, but having a precedence of having that kind of power in leadership and where that can go.

We won't actually turn there, but just to take a quick look back at history of a biblical example. When you think in terms of tyrannical government, where a single leader can just make an edict that strongly effects people's lives. For a very easy example of this look at is Daniel 3. I won't turn there, as it is a very famous story which I think we're all familiar with, where Nebuchadnezzar sets up a golden image and says,

“When you hear the music, everyone is going to have to bow down to this or I'm going to kill you; I'm going to throw you into a furnace of fire and burn you up.”

That's the kind of thing where that can go with tyrannical governments. When you see nations headed in that direction, if you look into history, this kind of thing has a track record of not turning out so well for Christians. It can create environments where freely worshipping God and following your beliefs, can get pretty challenging if you get a leader who starts making edicts against what are considered acceptable in society.

In the last few weeks, I was having an email exchange with another church member. This is someone who, like myself, grew up in the church. We weren't specifically

talking about the examples I just mentioned, but rather the subject in general of where the world is going and the future. If you remember the days of the Worldwide Church of God, oftentimes a popular idea was put across that went essentially like this:

In the end time, if you are a faithful Philadelphian, diligently obeying God, you will be protected from persecution.

You basically got to sidestep all of any persecution. It was only those lukewarm Laodiceans who had to face all of that. It was in this context that this person made a comment to me in the email. I would like to read this as part of the introduction for the sermon today, because I think it makes a good starting point. This person wrote to me:

“For years we were told we would escape all the hard times. God would whisk us away to a place of safety, if we were good enough. I don’t think many of us are emotionally or spiritually prepared for these times.”

What she is referring to, is that if you had grown up all your life, being taught from childhood that as long as you are faithful and obedient to God, things won’t get too painful for you, you’ll be protected. This will go away from you; it’s only if you are rebellious that it will happen to you. That’s a very comforting idea, but it’s just not reality and it does not correlate with the Bible. It’s quite the opposite of what the New Testament says. We are going to address this greater subject today, and if you would like a title for this sermon, it’s:

Are You Ready to Face Persecution?

Maybe you have for years, like myself, grown up being constantly reassured with this idea. That as long as you are obedient and faithfully obeying God, things would not get too painful for you and you will always be protected. However, that is the exact opposite of what the Bible says about New Covenant Christianity. To begin, we will go to 2 Timothy 3:10.

2 Timothy 3:10 *But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, 11) persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me. (NKJV)*

In other words, it was painful and difficult, but God didn’t desert me. He delivered me through it all.

12) Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. (NKJV)

Notice, it does not say, just those rebellious Laodiceans or just a small number of people will have to face persecution. No, it’s a dogmatic, all-encompassing statement, that is part of the contract of being a New Covenant Christian. It is to suffer through much tribulation going into the Kingdom of God. That is how it works. I

know we like to believe the more emotionally comforting message, but it's just not the message the New Testament has. The New Testament repeatedly tells us that the path is narrow and difficult and few find it and it is through many tribulations that we enter the Kingdom of God—that's just how it works. Persecution is part of the equation.

To properly understand what Paul is getting at here, we have to think of a broader definition of persecution than we usually think of. When we think of the term persecution, we think of Paul's life or someone like him. He was thrown into prison for his beliefs, he was beaten, he had lynch mobs coming after him, throwing him out of town and stoning him and things of that nature. We think, "That's definitely persecution." I think Paul has a much broader definition of this. What it's getting at is, Satan is our persecutor, and the path to salvation for everybody—there are no exceptions—requires having to overcome his temptations and the trials that he brings upon us. That is part of the testing process that we have to go through to obtain salvation. That means all of us are going to face very painful trials. It doesn't mean we will all get thrown into prison or stoned by lynch mobs or things of that nature, but we have to realize that very painful trials like that are certainly a possibility. Christ even warned from His earthly ministry, going forward. He told his apostles and followers to expect to have problems with the world around them, simply because you don't fit in, because you are one of His followers and you obey Him. You can expect those issues to happen.

We see this in John 15.

John 15:18 *If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you.*

19) 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.

20) 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. (NKJV)

In other words, He was telling them it's just a normal expectation that the world is not going to be really crazy about you because you don't fit in. You don't fit in with their mentality and where they are going because you are trying to follow Christ. That's just the reality. As we go forward later and later in time—into the end times before Christ returns—we have to naturally expect that the world is going to get more and more wicked and we are going to get more and more out of step with it. That's obviously going to bring situations where we come into conflict with the world around us by just trying to live a peaceful life and obey God.

It's important to realize that when I say the whole process of salvation absolutely requires suffering and persecution, that it is all through the New Testament. We don't like to look at that, but that's what it says. We have to realize there is a good purpose to all of this. God doesn't bring this on us because He is mean or that He likes to torture us or make us squirm—that's not what it's about. He realizes that this process is fundamental for building our character and turning us into what He ultimately wants us to be for the Kingdom of God. Look at 2 Thessalonians 1:3.

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 in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure,
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;* (NKJV)

Notice that God puts us through this, not because He is callous or unloving or mean and likes to watch us squirm—no. He does this for our ultimate good, knowing that enduring through the pain proves our character and strengthens us. Because we either rely on Him and develop His character to get through it or we stumble and give in, and fall into sin. We will see later in the sermon, how that works. As I mentioned, if you remember the days of the Worldwide Church of God from childhood or have roots there, as many of our audience do, one of the popular ideas that was often taught—and we'll look later specifically at the scripture involved—the concept that, as long as you are a diligent, zealous Philadelphian and you faithfully obey God, then you get protected from persecution. It's only those lukewarm Laodiceans who are rebellious, they are the ones who are going to suffer and have to worry. But if you are faithful, you don't have to worry about persecution.

I remember a significant conversation I had about thirty years ago that first started getting me to see the fallacy in all of this kind of thinking. He was a very good friend of mine, an elder, who used to live in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. We used to have services in his living room. After services one day, we were all sitting around talking and I was espousing what I had heard all of my life, as to how to escape all the pain. My friend really got my attention and did this in an interesting way. He said,

“James, let me ask you a question. John the Baptist, would you say he was a Laodicean?”

He knew how I was going to answer that of course not—Christ Himself had said he was the most righteous man who had ever lived at that point. So, of course he was not a Laodicean.

“James, how did he die?”

He was violently murdered—got his head chopped off—even though he was described as the most righteous man who ever lived.

“What about the apostles, James, would you say they were Laodiceans?”

Of course not, these were zealous servants of God, they performed miracles, wrote the New Testament, founded the church—of course they were not Laodiceans.

“How did most of them die?”

They had been tortured and killed violently while they were serving God.

“So why is it that we think we are so different, that if we’re diligent, we can never face that? Why would that be?”

That’s when it first started hitting me that this was a really flawed idea. It feels good to our emotions but it’s just not accurate.

Let’s notice the expectations Christ gave the apostles. Turn to Matthew 10:1.

Matthew 10:1 *And when He had called His twelve disciples to Him, He gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease.*

2) *Now the names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother;*

3) *Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Lebbaeus, whose surname was Thaddaeus;*

4) *Simon the Cananite, and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed Him.*

5) *These twelve Jesus sent out and commanded them, saying: “Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans.*

6) *But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. (NKJV)*

Notice He is sending them specifically to the nation of Israel. You would expect, comparatively speaking, that He would be sending them to a little less friendly audience. He’s not sending them out to the Gentiles to tell them about this God they had never heard of, He’s sending them out to people who should be familiar with the Old Testament and believe in the Sabbath and the Holy Days—you would expect it to be a friendly audience—but notice how He set their expectation. Turn to verse 16.

16) *“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.*

17) *But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues.*

18) *You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles.*

19) *But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak;*

20) *for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.*

21) *“Now brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death.*

22) *And you will be hated by all for My name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.*

23) *When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.*

24) *A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.*

25) *It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household!*

26) Therefore do not fear them. For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. (NKJV)

Even though He is sending them to what you would expect to be a friendly audience, He is telling them that they are going to be persecuted, they were going to get thrown out of places, going to get barred and eventually killed; this was going to be painful. Realize He wasn't promising them a rose garden in this life, the ultimate prize was salvation and making it into the Kingdom of God. The same thing for us. Just as Christ gave the apostles these kinds of expectations, He also, in the Olivet Prophecy, laid out for them, conditions that would play out from the time He was saying that, up until the end that we all need to be aware of. Let's take a look at that for a moment, in Luke 21:10.

Luke 21:10 *Then He said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.*

11) And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences; and there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven.

12) But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons. You will be brought before kings and rulers for My name's sake.

13) But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony.

14) Therefore, settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer;

15) for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist.

16) You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death.

17) And you will be hated by all for My name's sake.

18) But not a hair of your head shall be lost. By your patience possess your souls. (NKJV)

Christ was very blunt and realistic; this is going to be painful. This is going to be a difficult route to go down and you're going to have to struggle through it and endure to the end to make it through. There is going to be a wonderful future beyond that. You will make it into the Kingdom of God—there is a very positive end to all of this, but it's going to be painful to get there. It is going to be a difficult struggle. It's a nice idea to think we would be protected from all that and get the Kingdom too. Sometimes we get a flawed idea in our heads because we confuse what, I like to call, Old Covenant promises with New Covenant promises. We'll read chapters like Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, which were a part of God's promises to Israel in a physical covenant. He said, that if they continually obeyed Him, He would keep blessing them and the skies would just rain down blessings to them, and they would live in a physical utopia—as long as they faithfully obeyed. If you disobey and walk away from My law, things will get painful. The more you do that, the more painful it will get and it will get worse and worse. Sometimes we look at that and think, as a Christian, shouldn't that be the way it works? No—yes God certainly does bless us and protect us and take care of us, but if you read through the New Testament, it's a totally different picture. I'm just touching on this. If you would like a more thorough addressing of this subject, I gave a sermon back in 2011 called Blessings and the New Covenant. I was trying to show how the whole idea of blessings in the New

Covenant has totally different definitions, because it's not based around a pain-free life. It's based around building our character and making it into the Kingdom of God. That requires a painful testing process.

Where does that idea come from? That as long as you were a faithful Philadelphian and obeyed God, you got protected from persecution. We're going to look specifically at those scriptures today and see what they really say. In Revelation 12 we'll see a very famous set of scriptures. We will start reading in verse 13.

Revelation 12:13 *Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child.*

14) But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent.

15) So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood.

16) But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth.

17) And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ. (NKJV)

As you know, when we read through prophecy, particularly the book of Revelation, there is oftentimes symbolic language that you have to interpret and sometimes we are speculating on our interpretations of it and making our best guesses at the time. The way this is typically explained, I generally agree with.

This is normally explained that the woman is a picture of the Church of God—those who have God's Holy Spirit and who are following Him. The dragon is obviously Satan and there will be a point in the future where Satan is trying to persecute the church and he sends an army after them in some fashion, symbolized by this water coming after them. There is a point where God protects this group of people from being attacked by this army and they would then be in this place of safety during this time frame. There are obviously others who aren't protected as we can see from verse 17. I'm not dogmatic about all of these verses, but I think that a general explanation is probably accurate. Here's where this kind of goes off the rails. We read something into this that's not really there. We added the idea that this group who get protected are the faithful Philadelphians and the group in verse 17, are the lukewarm, rebellious Laodiceans. Let's read verse 17 again and see if it says anything like that.

17) And the dragon was enraged with the woman [I agree the woman most likely refers to the church], and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring [so this would be church members, those with the Holy Spirit who he's pursuing. But let's notice how they are described—there's two descriptors], who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ. (NKJV)

In other words, they obey the commandments, they have Christ's testimony and try to follow it. Does any of that say they are this lukewarm, rebellious, bad Laodiceans?

No, it doesn't say that at all. We injected that idea in because it results in a positive, feel-good narrative that we would like to see. It's a very comforting idea to think that as long as I'm righteous and following God, He's going to protect me from all pain. It's just those bad, rebellious people who get hurt. That's a nice idea, it's just not what it says—it doesn't say that at all.

There's another key scripture that is often used to defend this idea. In Revelation 3:10. Verses 7-13 is the letter to the church in Philadelphia. If we focus on verse 10, this is always the focus of this subject.

Revelation 3:10 *Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. (NKJV)*

This is where this concept comes from, that if you are righteous Philadelphians and faithfully obeying God, He puts a web of protection around you and no persecution or big harm comes to you. Let's notice what this actually says. It's referring to an hour of trial that comes upon everyone on the planet—the whole world who dwell on the earth—all at the same time. To see where this is going to go, let's focus on the term "the whole world". There are places in the Bible where it sometimes refers to "the whole world" and in the context, it's probably more of a regional statement. It's the whole occupied world at that time or the greater Middle Eastern area that was the main Empire at the time. The Greek here—I'm not going to go into all the Greek words—but there are two key Greek words that are translated into English as "whole world". There are only three times in the Bible where those two words are used back-to-back. If we look at all three verses it's going to be very clear that when we say the whole world, we're talking about everybody on the planet. This is reference number one, and it's in Revelation 12:9.

Revelation 12:9 *So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world [same two Greek words there]; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. (NKJV)*

Does Satan just deceive a portion of the world, just a regional area, or is it everybody? It's the whole world, it's everybody on the planet that he influences. So, we know that when it's referring to something that happens to the whole world, that's what we're talking about, we're talking about everybody at the same time. Another reference is in Revelation 16:12.

Revelation 16:12 *Then the sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, so that the way of the kings from the east might be prepared.*

13) And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs coming out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet.

14) For they are spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the earth and of the whole world [same Greek words], to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty. (NKJV)

Obviously at this point we know that this is when all the world is unified against the returning Jesus Christ. But my point in all of this is, if we understand the reference there in Revelation 3:10, it was referring to an hour of trial which comes upon the whole world to test all of those who dwell upon the earth. If we look at the end time events there are number of things referred to that you could say are regional. We have armies surrounding Jerusalem, people fleeing out of that area, we have the king of the North and the king of the South battling it out and various things described there but these are often regional. Even during the time of the beast reign through the tribulation, most of the world is getting rich off the trading of the beast and they think life is wonderful. Ever thought the best are ruling, they are not thinking like they are persecuted. It's those who are not in line with the beast who are not going along with that. But what is a time, an hour of trial, where everybody on the planet is getting tested at the same time? That would be the Day of the Lord. If you read through Revelation, all of those plagues are global in nature and affect the whole planet—all the water, all the streams, all the trees—it's the whole planet at the same time. What Revelation 3:10 is talking about is being protected during the Day of the Lord. It does not in any way promise us protection as long as we are good and faithful and so then we never have to face persecution. It just doesn't say that. It's a nice feelgood idea, it's just not what the Bible says.

One of the things we also need to be aware of is persecution can come from within the church. It can come from other church members and it can come in some surprising ways. In Matthew 24, we'll read another section of the Olivet Prophecy.

Matthew 24:9 *Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. (NKJV)*

We know the only group that could be hated by all nations for Christ's name's sake are his followers, we're talking about church members here.

10) And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another.

11) Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many.

12) And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. (NKJV)

If you look up in an Interlinear bible, the word "love" in this verse is *agape*, "the spiritual version of love we get from the Holy Spirit". So, the only people who can lose their *agape* love are those that have had the spirit in the first place. Then in verse 13.

13) But he who endures to the end shall be saved. (NKJV)

Who can endure to the end and be saved? That would only be people who were offered salvation in the first place. I'm establishing this whole context so we can go back and look at verse 10.

10) And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. (NKJV)

We often read that in English and apply our common definitions to the words there, “offended” and “betrayed”. We look at these more along the lines of, a lot of people will get emotionally upset with each other and say mean things to each other and not be friends anymore. That really doesn’t get what this is getting at, at all. When we think of “offended”, it’s that person who did something insensitive and they upset “me”. That’s our idea of what offended is, it’s something that emotionally upset us. That’s not what this is getting at, at all. The Greek word that’s translated in English as *offended* is *skandalizo*, Strong’s #4624 and according to The Complete Word Study Dictionary of the New Testament by Spiros Zodhiates, it is defined as:

“A trap, stumbling block. To cause to stumble and fall, in the New Testament figuratively to be a stumbling block to someone to cause to stumble at or in something, to give a cause of offense to someone, causative, to cause to offend, lead astray, lead into sin, be a stumbling block or the occasion of one’s sinning, be lead astray or into sin, fall away from the truth.”

So, what we are talking about is that many will fall into sin, fall away from the truth. It’s not that many will get their feelings hurt because someone said something that was upsetting to them. This is a far worse situation. This is talking about falling into sin, falling away from the truth. What does “betrayed” refer to here? In our language today we often use the word “betrayed” in some pretty broad ways. For example, we might say I shared something really personal with this person. They promised me they were going to keep it between us, it was going to be private and they blabbed it to the world and betrayed me; they told my secrets to everybody. Or I was a faithful friend to this person, I was there for them when they needed me and when the tables turned and I needed a friend, they weren’t there for me. They were nowhere to be found and deserted me, they betrayed me. This is how we often use the term. That’s not really what the Greek is getting at. It’s the same Greek word that is used to describe Judas’ betrayal of Christ. Judas didn’t just not be his friend or blab things of that nature, Judas set Him up to be arrested, falsely accused, tortured and murdered. Let’s notice the actual meaning of the word. The Greek is *paradidomi* and Strong’s #3860 and according to Zodhiates it’s defined as:

“To deliver over or up to the power of someone, spoken of persons delivered over with evil intent to the power or authority of others, as to magistrates for trial or condemnation.”

If you think about that definition, as I mentioned, this is the same Greek word to describe Judas betraying Christ. What did he do? *He turned Him over to power or authority with evil intent for trial or condemnation*—that’s exactly what he did.

Think about this in the context of what we read in Matthew 24. Many will be offended, many will fall into sin, fall away from the truth. What will they do to other members? Turn them over to authorities with evil intent for trial or condemnation. This is pretty ugly. This is way beyond people getting upset with each other and saying mean things to one another. How does this happen? How does a person go from being a church member, striving to obey God, trying to live a Godly life and loving other people to getting to the point that they are willing to do something of that

nature? To maliciously turn over their former fellow brethren for trial or condemnation—how does that happen? Let's see from the Bible what Christ tells us about what can often happen and lead someone into *skandalizo*, to fall into sin. In Matthew 13 is the parable of the Sower. We're not going to go through the entire parable, we are just going to focus on the sections that are directly relevant to our issues here.

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

2) *And great multitudes were gathered together to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.*

3) *Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying: "Behold, a sower went out to sow.*

4) *And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them.*

5) *Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth.*

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

Notice those on stony ground, when the scorched heat of the day came, they withered away and didn't survive. Let's notice His interpretation of this because this is going to shed some light on our question. In verse 18 is Christ's explanation of the parable.

18) *Therefore, hear the parable of the sower:*

19) *When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart.*

This is he who received seed by the wayside. (NKJV)

This is not our focus, but I just want to mention what this is about, He's obviously referring to someone who hears the truth but they don't understand it. Their mind wasn't open and it went right over their heads because the veil over their eyes hadn't been removed. They heard the truth but it didn't register with them. This is someone who wasn't being called. Let's notice the next verse.

20) *But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; (NKJV)*

This is someone who heard the truth and it registered with them and they were excited about it and began to follow it. But let's notice what happens to them.

21) *yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles. (NKJV)*

Immediately, he *skandalizo*, he falls into sin as a result. Through tribulation and testing, because this individual doesn't have a root in them, they are not grounded. What we're going to see later in the sermon is that the "root" is not only having, but utilizing the Spirit of God. It's the strength to give you that spiritual root to be able to

get through it. If we're not utilizing that, it says when tribulation and difficulty comes, we fall away—we *skandalizo*—we're going to fall into sin. To give an example of how this can happen, let's look at the example of the Apostle Peter in Matthew 26:31.

Matthew 26:31 *Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: I will strike the Shepherd, And the sheep of the flock will be scattered."*

32) *But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee."*

33) *Peter answered and said to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble [skandalizo, fall into sin] because of You, I will never be made to stumble."* (NKJV)

Not me, I'm too strong for that.

34) *Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times."*

35) *Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" And so said all the disciples.* (NKJV)

We know this is very typical of human nature. Sometimes we can sit back from a distance—we refer to it in our culture today as the "Monday morning quarterback". The person who is not really in the game, they're not getting chased and hit by the defensive players but they can sit back and say,

"If I was the quarterback in the game, I'd do this, I'd have it all taken care of and be the hero, because I know how to do it all."

It's easy to sit back from a distant situation and academically say what you would do, but when it gets real and painful, often what happens is we find out we're not as strong as we thought we were. When it hits home and we have to face the pain, we start stumbling and are not as tough as we thought we were. This is what happened to Peter. He's really boasting big here. We won't cover this part of the story, but when the guys come to arrest Christ, Peter has his sword and he whips it out and starts swinging it around and Christ tells him to put it away. That is not the way to handle it. Then he witnesses Christ being carried off and he knows what is going to happen. Christ is being taken to prison and they're going to torture and kill this guy. Now it gets real, now the reality of persecution sets in and how painful that can be. Notice his reaction now that the situation has completely changed. Now it just got real and it got painful. Look at Matthew 26:69.

69) *Now Peter sat outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came to him, saying, "You also were with Jesus of Galilee."*

70) *But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you are saying."*

71) *And when he had gone out to the gateway, another girl saw him and said to those who were there, "This fellow also was with Jesus of Nazareth."*

72) *But again he denied with an oath, "I do not know the Man!"*

73) *And a little later those who stood by came up and said to Peter, "Surely you also are one of them, for your speech betrays you."*

74) *Then he began to curse and swear, saying, "I do not know the Man!" Immediately a rooster crowed.*

75) *And Peter remembered the word of Jesus who had said to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." So he went out and wept bitterly. (NKJV)*

We know Peter's story ultimately ends positively, he repents of this and recovers and goes on. But it's a very powerful lesson for us as to how easy it is to sit back and say, if I was in that situation, I would be tough and here's what I would do. When things get painful and we are directly facing that pain, we find out we are not as courageous as we thought we were and then we can cave under the pressure.

There's a key here—remember when I was reading the parable of the sower—it mentioned that the reason that those seeds thrown on the stony ground didn't survive was because they didn't have "a strong root". What that "root" is refers to is the Holy Spirit. That is what is given to us to give us the strength to be able to endure and have that root to be able to endure through these times. To see that, look at John 15:26.

John 15:26 *But when the Helper [the Holy Spirit] comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.*

27) *And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning. (NKJV)*

Notice verse 1 of chapter 16.

John 16:1 *These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble. (NKJV)*

He's telling them this so they would not *skandalizo*—fall into sin.

2) *They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service.*

3) *And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me.*

4) *But these things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them. "And these things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you. (NKJV)*

Christ is saying to them, that having that root, having the Holy Spirit, that's to help you not to *skandalizo*, not to fall into sin and for you to have that strength, courage and the faith to get through this. It's relying upon the Holy Spirit which gives us the strength to do that. It's not just a matter of having been baptized and received the Holy Spirit, we have to be using it. We have to be seeking it in our daily lives and constantly changing in our lives and obeying God and constantly bending to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Then we will have that strength we need when the trouble comes. When the trial and tribulation come and it gets painful and we have to make a decision to be courageous, even when you're feeling fear, you have to make

that decision to have the courage to endure through it. We need that strength from God to get through it, that's a very pivotal thing.

There's another key thing that we need to be aware of, to endure through persecution. To see this key, it's great to look at the advice of one of the most incredible individuals in the New Testament—when it comes to telling us how to have a proper attitude to get through persecution. The individual I'm referring to is the Apostle Paul. The reason I say he has so much credibility is, all we have to do is read the list of what this guy personally went through—as we put it in our modern-day culture—to know he has been there, done that and got the T-shirt. He lived through it all and knows what he's talking about. He wasn't academically explaining stuff to us, he lived it.

2 Corinthians 11:22 *Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I.*

23) Are they ministers of Christ? —I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often.

24) From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one.

25) Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep;

26) in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;

27) in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—

28) besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. (NKJV)

I would venture to say that there is not a lot of us hearing this today who has a resume like this guy. No one can say, let me tell you what I've been through—I've been beaten up, stoned and left for dead, shipwrecked and run out of town I have had attempts to kill me and I have been thrown into prison and I've done all of this in service of God; I doubt any of us can make that claim and have gone through all of this. This guy has tremendous credibility to tell us how to endure through persecution. What are the keys to hanging on and successfully getting through this.

Paul of all people would know how. He gives us some very good advice in the book of Philippians. What is particularly remarkable about this, if we understand that the book of Philippians was written while Paul was in prison. This wasn't someone who was in his comfortable headquarters office, behind his nice oak desk and writing a letter telling us about hard times and how to endure. This was a man in prison telling us how to endure suffering, while he was suffering. Again, it gives this man tremendous credibility to be listened to. Before we get into his specific advice, I want to establish, by reading part of the first chapter, to show conclusively that he is writing this letter from prison. I think that adds a whole level of credibility to all of this, that we realize the guy is writing this from a prison cell and not from a comfortable, air-conditioned office. Start in verse 3.

Philippians 1:3 *I thank my God upon every remembrance of you,*

4) *always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy,*
5) *for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now,*
6) *being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ;*
7) *just as it is right for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as both in my chains [notice that statement] and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of grace. (NKJV)*

He's mentioning his chains because he is writing this Epistle from prison. Now go to verse 12.

12) *But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel,*
13) *so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard [he's referring to the guards], and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ;*
14) *and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. (NKJV)*

He mentions the other brethren are more embolden; you can imagine because if this is the guy writing them to say, "Hold strong and endure through that.", they know the guy writing is locked up. He's been beaten, tortured and whipped and if he is telling me that, and he can endure it, then maybe I can hang on. You can see how that would strengthen others knowing that this is the guy giving you advice. It's not academic coming from this man.

Let's notice again his specific advice he is referring to in chapter 4.

Philippians 4:6 *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;*
7) *and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. (NKJV)*

He's getting at "the root" here, as I mentioned before, relying on the Holy Spirit, appealing to God for that strength and looking to Him to provide the strength and the peace and calmness to get through whatever the disturbing trial is. Now let's notice his attitude because the next couple of verses are incredible for someone in prison writing this.

8) *Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.*
9) *The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you. (NKJV)*

Think about someone in prison saying, "*Be an optimist—look at the good things, focus on all the good things in life.*" This person isn't in his comfortable office having his nice meal behind his oak desk, this is a guy in prison, suffering, saying be

positive and focus on the good things. There's a lot of credibility in this. Notice what else he says in verse 10.

10) But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity.

11) Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content:

12) I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things, I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.

13) I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. (NKJV)

Again, he gets back to the concept of relying on that “root—the spirit of God” and looking to God and Christ to get you through all of this. Notice that he also says how he has learned to be happy in whatever circumstances he finds himself in. He has realistic expectations for a New Covenant Christian and particularly for his role. Think about what could happen if he doesn't. If we fall into this idea that as long as we are faithful and a good Philadelphian and always obey God, pain is not going to come upon us. That can be a very devastating thing to set yourself up for, if you have those expectations.

Two things can happen in that regard. One is disillusionment with God. In other words, if in your mind, God has promised you a rose garden, as long as you are obeying, He's always going to take the pain away. Then, He gives you painful trial after painful trial and it's not turning out how you expected, then it's easy for a carnal human being to say, “I've been lied to.” This is not what I was told, this is not what I signed up for or expected to happen. God is unfaithful, He hasn't taken care of me. The other thing is, if you've been blindsided by pain, it's easy to start justifying, I can compromise, God wouldn't want me to get killed, He wouldn't want me to get thrown into prison or lose my job or lose my family relationships—He'll understand if I compromise because He wouldn't want me to face pain, that's the opposite of what He said.

To give you a concept of how this disillusionment can take place, as I mentioned in looking back to the days of the Worldwide Church of God. I think we had, unknowingly at times, our own version of health, wealth and prosperity gospel. I'm not trying to trash anyone from those days, I think it was just the best understanding of the time. But it was this idea that Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, would fully describe a New Covenant relationship with God; as long as you're obedient you don't face pain, and it's only when you're rebellious that you face pain. Think about a person who is coming from that mentality dealing with a very difficult trial and what that would do to them. Let me give you a very specific example.

This is an example I heard in a sermon thirty years ago or more. It was a minister who was talking about this couple whom he had counseled. It was a young married couple and they had a small child. This small child had some severe health problems. I don't remember specifically the problems the child was facing, but it was chronic problem that was very difficult for the family to deal with. He said the father of the family was really struggling with this, not just because of the natural things a parent would go through with their child, but it was also challenging his whole view of

God. He had been taught this idea that as long as you are faithful and obeying God, God's going to take the pain away. If you are having problems like that you just need to figure out what the sin is and stop doing it, then all the pain goes away. This guy is praying and fasting and saying, show me what the problem is so I we can stop doing it and my child can get better and it can all be fine. He goes along with this but it doesn't work like that. His child keeps suffering. Later, as I heard this story from the minister who used this example years ago in a sermon, he commented that the father mentioned to him,

“I don't know how much longer I can go on serving
a God Who will not tell me what the problem is”.

In other words, it was a simple formula in his mind. As long as I'm obedient, then all the pain goes away. If that's the deal, God just needs to tell me what the sin is or what the problem is so I can repent of it and make it go away. Then my child gets healed—it's that simple. That is a complete misunderstanding of New Covenant Christianity. That is not how it works.

God certainly heals and protects us and takes care of us. But, as we began in this sermon, He absolutely promises us that with the New Covenant, all who want to live Godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. It's an all-encompassing statement, no exceptions, not just a small group and everybody else gets an easy slide—that's not how it works. That's not fundamental to how the character process is developed. It's very important to go into a situation, particularly if you're looking at a future that may have some severe persecution in it, with realistic expectations. Then you're not set up for those kinds of issues. We have to remember that when we went into the water at baptism, if you were properly counseled, you probably had a conversation about Luke 14. So, let's turn to Luke 14 and see a common set of scriptures that are normally discussed before a person goes into the water at baptism to set proper expectations. I'm very grateful for the fact that the minister who baptized me, went into this in great detail. In fact, he explained it to me like this,

I know, realistically for you at this point, these are words. You can't possibly comprehend at this point in your Christian journey, how difficult and painful this can get. But I'm going through this with you in detail because I want you to remember this conversation. Because as you enter the Christian life, there are going to be numerous times you are going to be dealing with a trial and thinking, “I didn't know it was going to be this hard.” I want you to remember this conversation, that this is what you agreed to.

I am so glad he did that because I can't tell you how many times I've been in a situation in my life and said, “I didn't know it was going to be this hard and hurt this much.” These words flash back into my mind and, once again, I'm sitting across that table in the Big Sandy library, watching this minister's face saying, I'm telling you this is what you signed up for, so when it happens, don't be surprised. Let's read Luke 14:25.

Luke 14:25 *Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them,*

26) *If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.*

27) *And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.*

28) *For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it—*

29) *lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him,*

30) *saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish?'*

31) *Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand?*

32) *Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace.*

33) *So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple. (NKJV)*

He's very blunt and straight forward with the wording here. It's important to remember that, because it's easy for us, as carnal human beings, to get into a painful situation where we realize, standing up for what we believe in is going to cause us some pain. We might lose some relationships, we might have problems with family members, we might lose our job, we might lose our life. It's easy to say, that God wouldn't want me to suffer like that, He'll understand if I just compromise on this. He wouldn't want me to have so much pain; but that's not what He says. He says if we are not willing to put Him first and suffer pain and to face loss for the pearl of great price of the Kingdom of God, then we aren't worthy of it. He's quite blunt about it. That's one of the reasons we are typically all told this before we go into the water at baptism, because that's the contract we signed. That's what we all agreed to. It is that we would suffer through persecution, even if that meant the loss of our own life to obtain the Kingdom of God.

We also have to remember that this can be a bitter pill to swallow. Looking at all of this, remember that God promised to be with us and to deliver us through everything that we would face. That He would never forsake us, that He would always be there with us, even when it's painful and it's difficult and you're struggling. That He would be there with us to deliver us through it. For our final scripture, turn to Romans 8:28.

Romans 8:28 *And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*

29) *For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.*

30) *Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.*

31) *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?*

32) *He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?*

33) *Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.*

34) *Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.*

35) *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?*

36) *As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter."*

37) *Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who 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 created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (NKJV)*

You see, God promised us a difficult, painful route. He told us in Matthew 7, the way to salvation is narrow, difficult and there are few who find it. It is something you have to endure, through great tribulations to make it there. But it is the pearl of great price. He also told us that if we are not willing to suffer and to endure through persecution, we are not worthy of His Kingdom. We have to take that very seriously and adjust our expectations accordingly, and most importantly, hang on to that "root". Be constantly striving to gain more of His Spirit, to yield to His Spirit, to use it in our lives on a daily basis so that we have that "root" and strength in us as we face persecution.

The world that we are in is getting scarier by the day. We know, just from the prophecies about the end times, as I love to put it, that there are two stories here. One is, we've looked ahead to the end of the book and we win, because that's the Kingdom of God. We know that very positive end of everything; of Christ returned and of us making it to the resurrection and all turns out very well from a physical perspective. But if we look at this from a national perspective, we look to the end of the book and we lose, because we know what happens with the prophecy. That it is going to be a painful route for those who are God's faithful followers to go through. But we have to realize that God will be there with us to encourage us all the way and to deliver us through it if we rely upon Him to do it. So, let's keep our eyes on that *pearl of great price* and make sure we're keeping our "root" strong, our expectations realistic—so we can endure to the end.