

THE SUFFERING CHURCH

Background

The people of God are familiar with persecution. The entire Holy Bible is a testament not only to God's goodness, justice and mercy, but also to the devil's opposition to God, which manifests itself in opposition to God's people in particular, and to all humankind in general. Right back in the earliest parts of the Bible we see persecution of the righteous by the unrighteous. 'Righteousness' is a word that the world does not like. 'Righteousness' seen from a human perspective is living as God intended. It always involves faith as we can never achieve righteousness by our own efforts. Righteousness comes from faith in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. Righteousness is in contrast to (and in opposition to) evil. Evil will not countenance righteousness but opposes it.

We focus in this Study on suffering in the context of persecution. Jesus said, *Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you* (Matthew 5:11–12).

The Old Testament

The earliest persecution that we encounter in the Bible was of Abel by his brother Cain, in Genesis chapter 4. Abel's sacrifice was acceptable to God, whilst Cain's sacrifice was not. So Cain was greatly jealous of Abel and murdered him – persecution to the point of death. (See Matthew 23:35; 1 John 3:12–13.)

The persecution of Lot and his two visitors is not typical of the persecution found in the Bible. Persecution is normally experienced over long periods of time. The persecution of Lot and his visitors was over a short period and yet it reminds us of what often happens in this world when whole communities gather, mob-handed, to persecute the righteous (Genesis 19:1–9). The fact that Lot is called a 'foreigner' suggests that hostility to him may have predated the incident recorded in Genesis 19.

The persecution of the Hebrews recorded in the book of Exodus was first and foremost because they were God's chosen people. It seems that Satan was seeking to prevent the people of God from reaching their promised land. The attempts to oppress them (Exodus 5:1–21) were ultimately aimed at destroying them, which became the candid objective of Pharaoh's pursuit of them with an army (Exodus 14:5–9). Whilst the incessant troubles recorded in the book of Judges, and Samuel, and Kings, might be considered by some as the ebb and flow of nations and tribes in conflict, the constant attack of Israel by its neighbours and those who lived among them also seems to have a deeper spiritual context. We are shown, especially in Isaiah, that some of Israel's troubles stemmed from faithlessness and disobedience. It is clear, however, that some of the faithful (like the prophet Isaiah) suffered in this world for being true to God and speaking his word boldly. The letter to the Hebrews lists some of the faithful witnesses who had suffered in the past.

The New Testament

It is in the New Testament that the reality of persecution of the disciples of Jesus – and in that we mean the true church (see Study 26) – becomes much clearer.

In John 15:18–21, Jesus said, *If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name'* And then in John 16:1–2, *All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God.* In saying that, Jesus was addressing the persecution that would afflict the immediate disciples and the early church. But he was also addressing all those who follow him. What was true for the disciples then is true for us today, but not always in such extremes.

Our Lord Jesus repeatedly warned of persecution for those who follow him, even within households – that brother would betray brother and children would betray parents. Jesus pointed out that even the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head (Matthew 8:20) so his followers should not expect an easy ride. Jesus told us not to be afraid when arraigned before the courts – the Holy Spirit will give us the words we need to say in our defence, and just as pertinently, we might add, in Jesus' defence as well. Luke records Jesus as saying, *...they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings*

and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict (Luke 21:12–15). In Matthew chapter 10 Jesus also warns of persecutions to come (Matthew 10:21–39).

The Lord himself is the ultimate realist. He knew what his own death would be. He made it very clear that to follow him is no picnic – it never has been and never will be easy. On account of Jesus, strife will emerge within societies, within friendships, and even within families. So, Jesus' call to discipleship includes frank warnings of danger, and of reviling, slander, accusation, floggings, arraignment before courts, hatred and death. There is a high cost to following Jesus. The Lord himself would be judicially murdered on false accusations of subversion, of forbidding the payment of taxes and of claiming to be king. Each accusation was a lie, but this did not protect him.

In the book of Acts we encounter the first persecutions against the fledgling church. But – and we need always to keep this very much in mind – God is in control. The early church was scattered by persecution, and the gospel message – of a righteous God of grace whose Son Jesus died and rose again that we might live – spread ever further. The whole epistle of 1 Peter is about preparing for suffering by way of persecution. (See 1 Peter 4:12–19.)

Jesus spoke clearly of the cost that would be incurred by becoming one of his disciples, and around the world today the body of Christ is experiencing great persecution. God commands us to remember them and pray for them as if we were suffering right beside them – see, e.g., Hebrews 13:3.

God will preserve for himself a church and a holy nation in spite of persecution suffered by his children. And those martyred men, women and children – martyred as they have been down through history – will have a special place in the kingdom of heaven. Where do we find the end of this story? As we might expect, it is at the end of the Bible. We pick up the story in Revelation chapter 6, where the apostle John recounts his vision of heaven's seals being opened. When the fifth seal is opened, John saw, *...the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained*. They ask God openly how long it will be before their blood is avenged. They are told to wait a little longer, until the last of the martyrs are gathered to heaven. Then, in chapter 7 we see the glorious climax. One of the elders said, *These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes*. (See Revelation 7:13ff.)

Finally, in Revelation chapter 19, John recounts: *Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him the glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'" And he added, "These are the true words of God"* (Revelation 19:6–9).

Summary

Although persecution of Christians is inevitable, it is also a means of blessing for those who suffer it. The persecution of Jesus' disciples is linked in the Gospels with the labour pains of the age to come (Matthew 24:4–12). Those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness are promised the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:10). Paul affirms that those who suffer with Messiah Jesus will also be glorified with him (Romans 8:17).

These blessings are not only for the future: suffering produces perseverance, character and hope in this life, so that believers can even rejoice in it (Romans 5:3–4; James 1:2–3). These blessings may pass from those who are persecuted to their brothers and sisters in Christ: it enables Christians to comfort other believers with the comfort they have received from God (2 Corinthians 1:3–7). Paul's afflictions are presented as his sharing in Christ's sufferings for the sake of the church (Colossians 1:24). And he also bears witness to his endurance of persecution for the sake of Messiah (2 Corinthians 4:8–12; 6:4–10; 11:23–25), a response required elsewhere from all God's people (Revelation 13:10).

Jesus' disciples are not left alone to face their enemies. Jesus himself will provide them with the words and wisdom to defend themselves (Luke 21:12–15). No one can snatch them out of his, or the Father's hand (John 10:28–29) – provided they stand firm to the end, they will be saved (Matthew 24:13).