

Persecution, the Persecuted and the Persecuted Church - by Nimal Wijesinghe - 01 November 2011

Persecution is mentioned first in the Bible when Jesus speaks of it in the Gospel of Matthew. There are many more references by Jesus on the subject in the New Testament and also by Paul the Apostle. It will help all those concerned about the persecution endured by Christians the world over today, to be familiar with what the Bible has to tell us.

Matthew 5:10-12

10 Blessed are those who are **persecuted** because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 "Blessed are you when people insult you, **persecute** you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they **persecuted** the prophets who were before you.

Jesus suggests persecution will follow on account of being righteous – i.e. of being in right standing with God. But that those so persecuted are BLESSED. Also BLESSED are those who are falsely accused of all kinds of evil because they are followers of Jesus. Jesus encourages all such people to be GLAD and REJOICE because they are in excellent company – i.e. the Prophets of old – all of whom can look forward to their GREAT REWARD in HEAVEN. What a wonderful future for the persecuted to look forward to!

Matthew 24:7-9

7 Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places.

8 All these are the beginning of birth-pains.

9 "Then you will be handed over to be **persecuted** and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.

Recorded in Matthew 24 is the account by Jesus of the signs of the end-times. One significant part of the end-time scenario will be persecution of the faithful followers of Jesus, who will not only be persecuted by those in the country they live in but hated by all nations.

That is how it will be for all true Christians. **Might it be pertinent to wonder if it would be proper for any human being to try and stop persecution by whatever means if Jesus has eloquently prophesied that there will be persecution because of Him?**

John 15:20-21

20 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.

21 They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me.

In the Gospel of John we read again that the followers of Jesus must expect persecution. They first persecuted Jesus all the way to Calvary and have ever since continued to persecute all who follow Jesus. Is this not the Christian's lot in this world? **Scripture tells us how to face persecution and not how to avoid it!**

1 Corinthians 4:10-14

10 We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honoured, we are dishonoured!

11 To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless.

12 We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are **persecuted**, we endure it;

13 when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.

14 I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children.

Paul, in his first letter to the Church in Corinth, spells out how the world will treat those who follow Christ. Paul's words, perhaps, describe accurately the persecution we see in parts of the world today which was eloquently described at Dunblane during the Annual Sessions of the Fellowship of St. Thomas on 24 September 2011.

Does Scripture, therefore, tell us that for the true Christian, persecution would be a form of 'business as usual'?

2 Corinthians 4:7-9

7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;

9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

Here in his second letter to the Church in Corinth Paul encourages the persecuted, reminding them that they are not abandoned and will not be destroyed. He acknowledges that those in Corinth are under persecution.

2 Timothy 3:10-15

10 You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance,

11 persecutions, sufferings — what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.

12 In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

13 while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

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14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it,

15 and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

The reality and the fact of the godly Christian life are clearly described by Paul at verse 12 (highlighted above) in his second letter to Timothy. **Persecution is inevitable.** And hence, those who escape persecution are either extremely fortunate or perhaps not a target for the evil one who must surely be the instigator of persecution of the true Christian.

Comment

It is natural that to a civilised mindset any form of persecution and cruelty will be abhorrent. However, as Christians should we not shift our vision beyond Earthly existence and focus on the hope all Christians can have of our eternal home where there will be no more pain or suffering, no tears but pure joy? Would that not suggest we should view our time on Earth through the lens of Scripture, which helps us view persecution and the troubles we will face in this Earthly life in its correct perspective – a stepping-stone to glory!

John 16:33 *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*

Revelation 7:16 *Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. 17 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."*

But, our Christian brothers and sisters enduring persecution today the world over need our prayers and our support. We cannot stand idly by and ignore their physical needs. Jesus has already taught us how to respond in His Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 5:39-45

39 But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

40 And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.

41 If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.'

44 But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

45 that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

And what about the emotional and spiritual needs of our brothers and sisters who are under persecution? Rather than discuss this subject, here is how I would pray for them.

'Almighty God I pray that your Holy Spirit will indwell those under persecution who are your faithful disciples, granting them a superhuman capacity to love their captors and persecutors and to see beyond the worst face of evil. I pray that they will be an invaluable tool in your hands and that they will be given Divine wisdom and knowledge to convey the Message you want them to preach in words and in how they respond to persecution and enable them to witness continually. I pray that the glory of the Lord will be seen in them by their persecutors and that in whatever the forces of evil do, the Lord's name will be glorified! I leave them all and their loved ones entirely in your hands, Lord praying, 'Thy will be done, Sovereign Lord!' Amen.'

Those persecuted in Asia and elsewhere because they are Christians and who will not deny their Lord and Saviour must surely be born-again Christians. They have found that to have Jesus is far, far better than houses or possessions or even their own human families. They live but surely God's Holy Spirit lives in them.

I wonder if these born-again martyrs for their faith in Jesus need our prayers so much as we, in the Western-world, need theirs!

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