

These four extracts were pulled from “The Christian & Government” chapter of my book, *The Entrusted Life*, published in Russian and Ukrainian. (The English version is still in manuscript form.) It is an effort to portray the *biblical* perspective of persecution that believers experience when they profess Christ. I realize that the biblical position on persecution will appear to be foreign if not bizarre to some people. But that is all the more reason they should be aware of the biblical attitude regarding this subject. And, of course, Scripture best speaks for itself. I think we owe it to our fellow believers to inform them about the possibility/probability of persecution in our time.

Hazards of Freedom

Living in freedom, the believer, more often than not, needs self-controlled *inner* discipline. Where freedom is lacking, Christians live primarily by *external* controls. For purely spiritual wellness and growth, it is better and easier for most of us to live for God with reduced freedom. Human nature being what it is, the quality of our Christianity diminishes in proportion to the added freedom that is afforded us. This is particularly true when the political authorities tolerate Christians or are in alliance with them.

But we “Westerners” don’t need nor should we want the world’s help to do God’s glorious work – spiritual or humanitarian. The truth is, we Christians have enough of our own money to pay our own way. (And even in poor countries, where Christians faithfully give the tenth of their income – be it with currency or with goods – ministry can be supported indigenously.) If the church doesn’t have enough money, it’s because we ourselves are withholding it from the Lord. All too often, we try to give God as *little* as possible when we should be giving him as *much* as we can. If we would give correctly, there would be no shortages in the Lord’s work. And the government could stay out of church affairs – as it should.

Under coddled conditions, applied Christianity begins to deviate from the biblical path. It becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between what is from God and what is from the world; what is Scriptural and what is humanistic; what is of the flesh and what is of the Spirit; what is beneficial to the cause of Christ and what is beneficial to our self-centered human nature. And this spiritual decline doesn’t happen overnight; it transpires so slowly, so subtly, that some Christians are not aware of what happened to them. They believe everything is just fine. Everything is normal.

It seems to me that when we Christians live in a country where there is full-orbed freedom, where government is tolerant (if not sympathetic), we tend to get preoccupied with this present world and forget why we are here. Eternity becomes remote and even eclipsed. In practice, this life becomes more important, more desirable than the next.

Humans are creatures of habit. The majority prefers predictability and stability. We’re comfortable with the known. We think there is safety in sameness. The longer we stay in one place, the harder it is to move, partly because we’ve accumulated so much dispensable, dispersible stuff. It’s easy to get addicted to this present world, especially when life is “good.” The more we’re attached to things, the less attached we are to Christ. When our relationship with the Lord is strong, material comforts are not all that important.

The Lord understands the power and pull of the flesh; he knows what’s good and what’s bad for us. When we are poor, in pain and made to feel unwelcome in this world, we get

homesick for heaven. We get our priorities straight, our values right. We focus on pleasing God and proclaiming Christ. Perhaps I should ask myself: Am I controlled by my old human nature or by the indwelling Holy Spirit? My will, with or without the Lord's help, makes those decisions. When we *insist* on Christianity that is padded with material abundance, carnal convenience and physical comfort, I think we are embracing "another gospel." Good-bye self-discipline, self-denial, self-crucifixion. Hello self-centeredness, self-satisfaction and pseudo-spirituality.

Don't forget that man's supposed freedom often results in the worse kind of bondage.

The Christian under Duress

It's just too easy to misuse (abuse?) freedom. That is why, very often, God does not entrust his children with affluence or even with freedom. He knows our sinful human nature all too well. I become concerned when I see God's people crusading for freedom from discrimination and persecution, as though Jesus said it is an inalienable right. The New Testament says nothing about a guarantee of social or religious liberty. The Jewish people of Jesus' time believed that if he was the Messiah, he should free them from Roman occupation. When he told them he came specifically to save lost souls, they rejected him. They wanted a political, not a personal savior.

Christians live by the Bible, not by country constitutions. No matter how promising the constitution of a given nation is written, our faith is in the Word of God – not in the words of a country's code. Jesus never promised us that conditions will be to our liking as we serve him anywhere in this world.

No matter what noble charters say and what rulers pledge their citizens, God's people know that freedoms can be lost at any given moment. *We were promised only one right when we decided to follow Jesus: the right to suffer with him and for him.* We will never lose that right. As long as we faithfully follow Christ, that right will be a very real part of our lives.

It is my heartfelt conviction that Jesus Christ's unique ideology and his radical (godly) way of life must be tested in a wide range of countries, in all kinds of circumstances, as a witness to every sort of society and to every kind of authority. If our lifestyle and our commitment cannot be distinguished from that of the world, God's mission has failed. The only conforming we do is to Christ, never to the world. If Christianity is tested only in full freedom or only under duress, it is not a valid test.

Therefore, committed children of God do not resent or oppose persecution; on the contrary, they embrace it. It's not that they have a martyr complex; it's just that they don't think of suffering for Christ is an experience to be evaded.

Let's not forget that God's Plan of Salvation is full of offensiveness in the mind of a degenerated person. The way Jesus lived, the things he taught and the claims he made about himself was outrageous in the thinking of the Jewish clergy.

- Christ himself is a stumbling block. (Read Romans 9:32-33; 1 Corinthians 1:23; 1 Peter 2:8.)
- The cross of Christ is offensive. (Read Gal. 5:11; Hebrews 12:2; 13:13.)
- The Gospel brings disgrace. (Read Acts 5:41; Hebrews 11:26; 13:13.)

- The Gospel is foolishness to the carnal mind. (Read 1 Cor. 1:18-23.)

When the Christian message deteriorates into just another inoffensive religion, it is no longer authentic.

Benefits of Persecution

Christ and his apostles maintain that trials and persecution are unavoidable, indispensable and beneficial.

It's for testing my faith.

“Consider it pure joy...whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance” (James 1:2-3).

The nature of faith is that it has to be tested. Unproven faith is unauthenticated faith. Neither God, nor Satan, nor demons, nor angels, nor humans see *true* faith until it is credibly and convincingly tested and validated. To be of any value, faith has to be materialized. God himself sets the testing standards. And, possibly, Satan has a few requirements of his own. (See Job 1:9-12,22; 2:4-6,10; Luke 22:31.)

It's for church growth. (Read Acts 8:1,4.)

Early Christians were not the only ones who had to pay for their faith with their lives. In many parts of the world today, thousands of people are being killed for professing Christ. But that's not the end of it, because the physical death of the Christian results in immediate passage to heaven.

In 2002, 65 percent of Sudan's population was Christian. Prior to persecution, it was only 2 percent. Do I want to see a spiritual awakening in my country? If yes, at what cost to me personally?

It's for personal strengthening.

“And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast” (1 Peter 5:10).

It's for individual spiritual growth.

“Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees” (Psalm 119:67,71).

It's for a testimony.

“On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them...” (Matthew 10:18). Persecution gives believers the opportunity to witness on a level of authority that, under normal conditions, would not be possible.

It's for The Gospel.

“So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel...” (2 Timothy 2:8).

It's for the glory of God.

“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God...if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name” (1 Peter 2:12; 4:16).

Compensation for Persecution

“Do not be surprised...if the world hates you” (1 John 3:13).

“All men will hate you because of me [Jesus]” (Matthew 10:22).

“In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

Let others seek governmental protection from discrimination and exemption from oppression (for being a certain nationality, for adhering to a certain religion, or for having a certain lifestyle). Committed followers of Jesus Christ don't ask for or expect immunity from being hated and persecuted.

We can't have it both ways; we can't be true Christians and not stand the test, not pay the price. That's the way our Lord has set it up. He has his reasons. We should not try to change things. If we do, it will be to the Gospel's detriment. And to ours. And to the world's.

Didn't Jesus alert us? “No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20).

By word and example, Jesus Christ taught that persecuted truth (and only persecuted truth) will overcome the world. It is worth repeating that if we suffer according to the will of God, we should praise him for it. Human nature doesn't understand this and doesn't know how to respond to it. That's how we overcome the world. We have unique, superior and effective weapons.

That kind of victorious suffering for Christ often develops a rare relationship between the persecuted and the persecutor. God pours into his child the needed forgiveness and love. Yes, love! God's love. The persecuted one prays for his persecutor and makes sure he returns good deeds for evil deeds. (See Matthew 5:39-45.)

God's apparent weakness is really hidden power in a hidden agenda. As Jesus was hanging on the cross, the chief priests ridiculed him: “He saved others' they said, 'but he can't save himself!” (Matthew 27:42).

Some people think God is a failure. But true children of God know this: “...the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength” (1 Corinthians 1:25).

Our great God outwitted Satan by willing to be weak, to be defeated. So, the Way of the

Cross guarantees triumph through helplessness, submission, surrender and loss. Even death. Let's adhere to God's infallible strategy. In our actions and reactions, let us not be tempted to use the unregenerate thinking and counterproductive tactics of the world.

We are blessed by God and should be happy that we are privileged to suffer for Christ. The Lord has joyfully prepared a boundless and everlasting reward for us to compensate us for everything we suffered because of him.

"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..." (Matthew 5:11-12). ◇◇