

THE PARADOX OF PERSECUTION

Introduction

Being a godly person does not guarantee an easy life. This incident provides a lesson on persecution, its temptations, and the way God sees it.

King Saul had the High Priest and his family murdered because he thought they were supporting David. The one surviving son came to where David was hiding to report what had happened. David's response shows the paradox of persecution – "Stay with me; do not fear. For he who seeks my life seeks your life, but with me you shall be safe."

Christian people should learn from this for the following reasons. That family was persecuted because of their association with David; Christians may be persecuted because of their association with Christ Jesus. The reason in both cases is the same – David's, and Jesus', association with God. That is why David's strange saying is valid for Christian people today. Consider: the danger, the instruction, and the promise.

The danger

'He who seeks my life seeks your life.' So spoke David to the person who came to him.

Saul was so paranoid about David that he was prepared to murder anyone he thought might support him, even the high Priest. His own men refused, but a foreigner – Doeg the Edomite- offered to do the deed.

Jesus often warned his disciples that they would suffer persecution for his sake. 'Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you ... for my sake' (Matthew 5:11). His apostles repeated the warning (e.g. 2 Timothy 3:12).

Why does association with God or Christ arouse hostility?

It is partly to do with God's authority. In David's case Saul resented the fact that God had appointed David to succeed him as king. He felt he and his family had the right to be kings and did not acknowledge God's authority. The same thing is true with regard to Jesus. His enemies refused to accept that God had 'made this same Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ' (Acts 2:36).

It is partly due to God himself. 'The carnal mind is enmity against God' (Romans 8:7).

It is also hostility towards the people of God. In the case of David the Edomites were historic enemies of Israel and that reflected God's choice of Israel as his people. In the case of Jesus the hostility was because of God (John 15:21-23).

It seems inevitable that hostility will appear in some way at some point in time.

The instruction

'Stay with me.' That sounds the opposite of good advice. Would it not have been safer to keep well clear of David? No.

That is because the danger is not what it seems. Appearances can be deceptive. The greater danger was to take Saul's side. In our case the greater danger is to take the side of the world against Jesus. David became King. Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords. Does Satan tempt you to turn back? Read about Asaph's experience in Psalm 73.

Jesus was concerned to make this clear – ‘My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!’ (Luke 12:4-5). To pretend we are not his disciples in order to save our skin is hypocrisy – the sin of the Pharisees – and will not succeed for ‘there is nothing covered that will not be revealed’ (Luke 12:2).

Apostasy happens through various temptations, especially when they come together. We are attracted by relief from trouble, by spiritual ease in place of heart work; and we are influenced by our experiences and by people close to us. The writer to the Hebrews saw Christians who were on the verge of giving way and abandoning their faith. That would have meant abandoning Christ, and ‘if we sin wilfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.’

David’s instruction was, ‘Stay with me’. That is Jesus’ message also to those who suffer for his sake.

We do that when we associate publicly with him, especially when he is attacked.

More fundamental than that is staying with him in a close personal relationship. ‘Abide in me’ (John 15:4, 6, 7, 9). On his part that involves speaking to us through the Bible and caring for us in practical ways. On our part it involves trusting him and obeying him.

The most basic way of all is simply having faith in him. Continue to believe in him; have confidence in him; keep his words.

The promise

‘With me you shall be safe.’ David could say that because he had God’s promise he would become king. What wonderful faith to say it in those circumstances! While Jesus was hanging on the cross he could say to the thief ‘Today you will be with me in Paradise’ (Luke 23:43).

Jesus promise is that his people will be saved. That means being rescued from sin – its power and penalty, from Satan, and from the world. It also means being kept safe whatever happens. It means receiving the inexpressible grace of God that not only forgives sin but makes us his children and his heirs.

At that moment the promise David gave seemed impossible to fulfil. Under persecution or temptation a Christian may feel their case is hopeless. So what arguments can David or Jesus bring to persuade us?

We have God’s track record of rescuing his people. He rescued his people from Pharaoh and protected them from the surrounding nations, ‘He permitted no one to do them wrong; Yes, He rebuked kings for their sakes, saying, “Do not touch my anointed ones, and do my prophets no harm”’ (Psalm 105:15). He delivered Daniel and his friends in Babylon. He calmed the storm when his disciples were in panic. He raised Jesus from the dead.

We remember God’s ability to fulfil his promises. ‘Is anything too hard for the Lord?’ Jesus is Lord of all with authority and power over the forces of nature, the demonic world, earth’s rulers, and private individuals. God says to his people, ‘No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is from me,” Says the Lord (Isaiah 54:17). Jesus even has the keys of hell and of death (Revelation 1:18).

We must also remember God's purpose. It was his purpose that David would sit on the throne of Israel. Nothing could stop that. He provided Jesus for the sake of his church and God promised to uphold him in his task of redemption – nothing could stop that happening. God is forming the church for the sake of Jesus his Son; "They shall be mine," says the Lord of hosts, "On the day that I make them my jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him." (Malachi 3:17); nothing can prevent any one of them reaching heaven.

'He who touches you touches the apple of my eye' (Zechariah 2:8).