

Why Persecution Is Needed

Acts 4:23-31

April 24, 2016

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What is persecution? This question arises from our text in Acts 4 as the apostles are apprehended and threatened for preaching and teaching in the name of the resurrected Jesus. Is persecution simply the verbal and physical opposition to another point of view (any point of view)? That is the worldly definition of persecution.

When I as a minister preach against immoral behavior (e.g. adultery or fornication), against “same sex” marriage, or against the Islamic religion, is that persecution? Am I persecuting such people, groups, or religions? If a righteous, covenanted civil government should establish laws against abortion, against witchcraft, and against homosexuality, would that civil government be guilty of persecuting those individuals who believed their consciences allowed them to engage in such wicked activities?

Dear ones, persecution (biblically speaking) is hatred in speech and in conduct that is directed against those embracing and defending the truth and righteousness of Jesus Christ—as revealed in Holy Scripture (Matthew 5:10; Mark 4:17; 2 Timothy 3:12).

Thus, when ISIS murders and rapes the Yazidis of Iraq, or when Iran imprisons/executes those of the Baha'i faith, or when Hitler massacred many of Jewish people, these certainly may be accounted acts of murder perpetrated against men, women, and children who were living peaceably and obeying the laws of those countries, and yet from a biblical perspective, I submit this is not persecution.

Let me be clear. I am not in any way justifying such blood-thirsty and heinous acts of tyranny. All I am saying is that from a biblical perspective, we cannot call these acts “persecution”. For one can only be persecuted for standing as a faithful witness to the truth and righteousness of Jesus Christ (whether by a king or by Satan—Job).

Moreover, it is not persecution for anyone to suffer judgment for doing that which is evil (1 Peter 4:15-16).

Nor does the Scripture consider the execution of God's justice by a civil magistrate against evil doers that violate God's Law as being a species of persecution (Romans 13:4). The same is true with regard to the exercise of the keys of the kingdom by Christ's Church against an unrepentant offender (Matthew 18:15-20).

Dear ones, if we do not make such proper biblical qualifications as to what constitutes persecution and what does not, we will have to conclude that Elijah persecuted the prophets of Baal when he called for them to be slain for their idolatry in leading God's people away from the worship of God alone (1 Kings 17:40). And if we do not make proper biblical distinctions as to what constitutes persecution and what does not, man will then ultimately sit in judgment over the Lord God Himself (calling God the greatest persecutor) because He will cast all idolaters into the lake of fire that burns forever and ever (Revelation 21:8).

When the apostles were threatened not to preach or teach in the name of the resurrected Christ, they were being persecuted in biblical terms. But lest we look at persecution through a mere negative and gloomy pair of glasses, let us hear the Holy Spirit as He instructs us today as to some of the benefits that come our way by means of persecution. Let us consider these main points today: (1) Persecution Brings God's People Together

in Fellowship (Acts 4:23); (2) Persecution Brings God’s People Together in Prayer (Acts 4:24-30); (3) Persecution Brings God’s People to Evidence Boldness from the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:31).

I. Persecution Brings God’s People Together in Fellowship (Acts 4:23).

A. The apostles, Peter and John, have now been tried by the Sanhedrin and released with the unlawful command that they cannot teach any more in the name of Jesus (which the apostles say in effect they cannot do)—Acts 4:18-21. Now our text tells us that the persecution of the Sanhedrin that was intended to scare them into submission did just the opposite—the persecution sent them right into the arms of fellowship of their Christian brethren (Acts 4:23). They did not scatter in fear, but saw their strength to be found in the company of God’s covenanted people. Peter and John gave to them an account of all that had transpired before the Sanhedrin.

1. This is one of the blessings that comes from persecution. We grow in our love and appreciation for those to whom we are bound by the cords of God’s covenant love. The lines that separate the Christian from the world become clearer when persecution arises. The faithful Christian cannot stand in some kind of neutral territory. He/She realizes that there is a bond of fellowship and communion that he/she has with God’s covenanted people from the past (in whose steps we are bound to walk) and with God’s covenanted people in the present.

2. And because of this covenantal bond among God’s people, we who are not directly persecuted take up the cause of those who were/are persecuted for their faithfulness to the truth and righteousness of the resurrected and exalted Jesus Christ. We do not make the faithful witnesses and martyrs of Christ into “saints” to whom we pray (as does the Roman Catholic Church), but we do stand in fellowship with them as they stood for Christ (for in so doing we are not simply standing with faithful men, women, and children, but most importantly we are standing with Jesus and we are being persecuted for Him—Acts 9:5).

B. Persecution is not enjoyable, but it is profitable in leading us to love and appreciate the fellowship of the saints.

1. When we are not undergoing persecution, trials, tribulations, and afflictions, it is easier for us to drift into our own isolated bubbles from one another, but suffering and persecution brings us out of ourselves to pray for, to encourage, and support, and to help one another—to remember we are bound and united to one another by covenant (Romans 12:15; 1 Corinthians 12:26).

2. Suffering will strengthen the love and bond between those who both honor their marital promise made in the presence of Almighty God and witnesses, but suffering will break down the pretense of love and the covenant promises between those who will not honor their marital oath made in the presence of Almighty God and witnesses.

II. Persecution Brings God’s People Together in Prayer (Acts 4:24-30).

A. Just as persecution drives God’s people to come together in fellowship, so persecution drives God’s people to humbly (yet boldly) call upon the Lord their God. Just as the Lord’s Prayer is a model prayer for us to use in fashioning our own prayers unto our gracious Heavenly Father, so this prayer likewise is a model prayer for us to use in times of persecution, suffering, afflictions, and trials that we face from enemy forces in the spiritual realm and in the physical realm.

1. Sadly, it is more likely suffering and persecution that will send us running to the Lord in prayer than His many blessings that we daily enjoy. When you become comfortable basking in the sunlight of God’s kindness all around you, you often forget your God and take for granted the daily benefits that He so graciously bestows upon you (Bibles, ordinances, brethren, justification, purity of worship, health, prosperity,

family and friends). But let the enemy arise against you in slandering you, tempting you, making a mockery of your faith in Christ and standing for the truth of Christ, and in threatening you with consequences if you do not compromise the truth of Christ, and you will with great urgency fall before the Lord and encourage the brethren to join with you in standing against that common foe. It is at such times we see just how weak we really are and how much we truly need Christ and one another.

2. I'm reminded of the threat of the King of Assyria against Jerusalem. Assyria had led Israel (the Northern Kingdom) into captivity (722 b.c.), and now this mighty power was at the very gates of Jerusalem, threatening their complete destruction if King Hezekiah did not unconditionally surrender to the massive and cruel army of Assyria. It was in those most urgent straits that King Hezekiah prayed and called out to the Lord (Isaiah 37:16-20). In answer to the threats brought against God's people (who bore witness for Jehovah), the one true living God sent His angel who slew 185,000 of the Assyrian troops (Isaiah 37:36), who then returned to Assyria (that was not persecution, but God's righteous judgment). The Psalms likewise are filled with David's prayers to God as he faces persecution enemies, from friends, and from his own son, Absalom. Persecution and suffering send us to our knees in prayer.

3. Dear ones, God wants us to quickly call out to Him in times of trouble, persecution, and suffering, rather than to look to the arm of flesh to deliver us. However, He does not want our prayers to Him in times of trial and tribulation to be the only times we turn to Him. If persecution and suffering are the only times we call upon the Lord, we are only thinking of God as an insurance policy that we use in extreme circumstances. However, persecution and suffering should reveal to us our daily dependence upon Him moment by moment. God wants us to enjoy fellowship with Him every day—He gives us Himself and all we want is fire insurance. How foolish we are! How forgetful we are! How earthly-minded we are!

B. Briefly consider the prayer offered with one accord (i.e. with one mind in unity) by the brethren. This was a prayer that was most likely offered to God on behalf of all the brethren gathered but offered by the voice of one of the apostles.

1. **First, this prayer exalts the greatness of God (Acts 4:24).** This is not the usual word used for "Lord" (*kurios*), but is the less frequent word used for "Lord" (*despotes*). Their prayer is offered to the Divine Despot, who rules absolutely supreme over all. You see, the word "despot" is not necessarily evil when it refers to God (though sinful men hate this truth). Our God is a good, loving, righteous, and wise Despot.

a. Here the brethren confess that in the face of persecution, it is not the Sanhedrin that are in control, but rather it is God who controls the Sanhedrin and controls all their wicked threats and attempts to silence their testimony for Christ. Their divine Despot is unlimited in power.

b. In fact, this Divine Despot is the God who created all things. If He created all from nothing, He certainly controls all for His own glory and to the benefit of His Church. He surrounds the enemy; the enemy does not surround Him (Elisha in Dothan, 2 Kings 6:15-17). Dear ones, let us not profane the name of God by not showing reverence for the high and holy titles we ascribe to Him in prayer. Let the weight of God's name so humble you that the fears and threats of the enemy fade into the background.

2. **Second, we see that these brethren in their prayer appeal to God on the basis of His own Word (Acts 4:25-26).** These are the words of David in Psalm 2:1-2.

a. Note that though Psalm 2 has no superscription indicating that it is a Psalm written by David, it is nevertheless ascribed to David. So likewise, the various Psalms in the Psalter that have no superscription specifically identifying them as "A Psalm of David" does not mean that we do not know who the author of that Psalm is, but rather that all such Psalms in the Psalter are the inspired Psalms of David.

b. Psalm 2 sets forth the royal enthronement of Christ, the Messiah, at God's right hand (which was fulfilled in Acts 1-2), and also addresses the enemies of Christ, who plot and rage against Christ, as they imagine in their vain imaginations that they can actually overcome Him (this they tried to do by crucifying Him and trying to keep Him in the tomb).

c. This is a Messianic Psalm to which these brethren turn in their prayers as pointing to the very conflict that they faced at that time (and which we by application face in our battle against those who oppose Jesus Christ as God’s anointed King). Dear friend, you do not have to be outwardly opposed to Christ in persecuting Christians for standing for Christ. You need only not stand in faith with Christ to be opposed to Christ. You may say, “But I’m not against Christ.” But hear, my friend, the words of Christ, “He that is not with me, is against me” (Matthew 12:30).

d. When we pray, God delights for us to use His own Word as our trustworthy appeal for His help and our needs. That is why memorizing Scripture (and the promises of God are so important in our prayers). We do not bind God by quoting His promises. To the contrary, He has bound Himself by His own promises. This is how Jesus also faced the temptation and persecution of Satan—He quoted Scripture in overcoming the enemy (Matthew 4).

3. **Third, our brethren in the faith apply the Scripture to their own context; for the enemies they faced were specifically in view in Psalm 2 (Acts 4:27).** Dear ones, the Scripture is relevant to us even when our particular circumstances are not prophesied to occur as in Acts 4. God’s Holy Word is to be applied to our fight and battle against the enemy (they that be with us are more than be with them; my God shall supply all your needs; the kings of the earth were gathered against the Lord). God’s Spirit illuminates our minds to understand how a truth, a promise, or a historical event applies to us, even though we were not the original recipients of the inspired books and letters in Scripture.

4. **Fourth, we hear our ancient brethren to whom we are bound by faith and covenant rest themselves in the sovereign decree of God (Acts 4:28).**

a. Dear ones, the doctrine of predestination is not a cause of fear or worry to the child of God, but is rather a cause of great assurance. For it is your Heavenly Father who created you and loved you from all eternity and sent His only begotten Son to redeem you that has predestined all things for His most wise and most holy purpose and for your salvation, sanctification, and glorification in heaven. If our salvation and victory of God hangs every moment upon the mere changeable circumstances of man or Satan, then there can be no assurance that God will be victorious or that Christ will conquer Satan or that you will overcome the flesh, the world, and the devil. But because God is absolutely sovereign, you can rest assured that He is working all things to His glory and for your good (Romans 8:28; Genesis 50:20; Habakkuk 3:17-19).

b. Listen: Sinful man is responsible, for he is fulfilling the wicked desires of his own heart, and yet God is working out His own purposes in bringing salvation to His people. If the most heinous and wicked act of sinners is foreordained and predestined, then are all the acts of man (Ephesians 2:8-10).

5. **Finally, in the prayer of these faithful witnesses of Christ in the face of persecution, we hear them supplicate the Lord for boldness in speaking the truth of Christ and for the power of the Holy Spirit to perform mighty deeds that confirm their word and ministry (Acts 4:29-30).**

a. These brethren come to the throne of grace with confidence pleading with the Lord to supply that which they lacked.

b. Isn’t it interesting that that for which they ask God is not to help them escape from Jerusalem, or to save them from the persecution, or even to preserve their lives? They ask the Lord for boldness (the same Greek word used in Acts 4:13): freedom of speech without silence, reservation, or fear. They prayed, “Lord, give us a tongue that is not restrained in speaking the truth in the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us not cower in fear, but be given a wondrous freedom of speech that speaks the truth in love.” Boldness is not unloving. It simply believes it is more important to speak the truth in love than to be silent. Dear brothers and sisters, it is more faithful to suffer the consequences of speaking the truth in love than to be silent.

III. Persecution Brings God’s People to Evidence Boldness from the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:31).

A. These brethren prayed for boldness and God heard and answered their prayer in shaking the room where they met. It was as if God said, "I am pleased with your prayer, my people." And they went forth by the power of the Holy Spirit speaking the Word of God with boldness. More than being delivered from our trials, our sufferings, or our persecutions, we need boldness to declare faithfully the truth of Jesus Christ out of love for Christ and love for those to whom we speak.

B. I close with this remarkable quote from a letter of the young covenanted minister and martyr, James Renwick, who was slain for His faithful adherence to Christ and His truth against many enemies who sought his death. This was his godly advice as to how he saw the persecution he faced from many adversaries.

Rejoice in your light affliction which but is but for a moment. Count your antagonists your greatest friends, for what are they doing by all the storms they raise against you, but contributing to the mass of your glory? O fear them not, but keep your Captain-general upon your right hand, and then cry to them to shoot their fill (The Life and Letters of James Renwick, Rev. W. H. Carshaw, 1893, p. 170).

Dear ones, Jesus Christ was first persecuted and suffered and then He was glorified. That is not the path of Christ and the apostles alone, or the path of super-Christians, but it is the path of all Christians who will reign forever with Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 3:12). Let persecution drive you to Christ and not away from Christ, to the brethren and not away from the brethren, to prayer and not to the arm of flesh, and to evidence boldness and not cowardice; for He that stands with you is the Sovereign Lord, the Creator of heaven and earth; and they that be with you are many more than they that be with the enemies of Jesus Christ.

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