

# Persecution: Be Prepared

*The Gospel of John*

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**Bible Text:** John 16:1-4

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I invite you to turn in your Bible to the gospel of John chapter 16. We are in the midst of Jesus' final words. He is preparing his disciples for his departure.

Presumably, now, they have left the upper room. It is night. They are on their way toward the Garden of Gethsemane. He speaks to them of another Comforter that would be coming in his stead as the Spirit is called the παρακλητος (par-ak'-lay-tos) or the Comforter. We can presume a number of things from that. One is we can presume that his role will be to comfort. Another is that we can presume also that there will be a people who will need to be comforted. And also we can presume that there is something for which that people will need to be comforted for.

The work of the Holy Spirit in the Church is done in the context of persecution, trial and temptation. The Spirit of God is not guide to a people who are on a straight path, who are perfectly able to manage their own way. But he is a guide to the pilgrim who is on a hard road, on a difficult path. He has come to assist men through a difficult battle, men who have been tried beyond their own strength, men who have gone through great trial in their life. He is there to assist. But we think that we can stand on our own, he is no guide to us who can manage our own way.

If one were to define authentic biblical Christianity solely using the Word of God, solely using the Scripture, we would not come up with anything else, or anything less than a faith that includes suffering and trials and persecution. These are a presumed part of biblical Christianity.

In John 16:1, after disclosing to them in John chapter 15 that the world would hate them because they are not of the world, because they were chosen out of the world, he says in the beginning of verse one, he says:

These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble. They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me. But these things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may

remember that I told you of them. And these things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you.<sup>1</sup>

I will begin this morning, first, by briefly examining the text, the four verses that we just read. Then we are going to turn into how these verses were fulfilled, first in the early church in the book of Acts and throughout the beginning of Church history, looking at persecution in the Church. And then we are going to take a look at how these verses of Scripture are being fulfilled today around the world. And, lastly the heart of this verse which asks us the question: Are we prepared? Are we prepared for persecution?

The disciples are about to embark on an experience of extreme trials, excommunication from the synagogue and from the nation of Israel, even to the point of being martyred. And that is what Jesus is telling them here.

It is very hard for us as humans, as human beings with human natures, when we see a cause, to presume that that cause would be God's cause when it does not appear to be succeeding. We suppose that if God is, quote, in something, that it will be blessed with smooth sailing. And it is hard for us to see God when we are traveling down a painful path. Sometimes it is the hardest times when we don't understand the things that are going on around us. And Christ knows this about us. He knows this about our nature. He knew that about the nature of the disciples and so to keep them from stumbling at this time the Word in Greek is σκανδαλιζω (skan-dal-id'-zo) which is to keep him from falling into a trap. To keep them from being trapped he lays the truth out for them. He doesn't hide anything. He doesn't hold anything back at this point.

And he does so now, the text tells us because before they were already being comforted by him. He was with them. It wasn't that they didn't have trials. They did have trials. They had their storms on the sea. But Jesus was right there by their side. And when the fretted, Christ was there to say, "Fear not."

But he was going to be leaving them now. And so that they would not stumble over the fierce opposition that was coming ahead, he prepares them so that when it does come they won't think it strange when the fiery trial comes upon them. They won't think it strange when the persecution comes. It won't take them by surprise.

So he tells them. He warns them with these words. "They will put you out of the synagogues."<sup>2</sup> Literally the word in Greek is un-synagogued. They will un-synagogue you. That is, they will no longer consider you a citizen with them. Un-synagogue meant to pass out of the nation. And this was a specific prophecy that Jesus was speaking here to the disciples who were Jewish in a Jewish nation.

And that is exactly what happened. The Jews who did not believe, cast the early believers from the congregation of Israel. And this is alluded to in Hebrews chapter 10 verses 32 to 35 where it says the writer of Hebrews is writing many, many years later to

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<sup>1</sup> John 16:1-4.

<sup>2</sup> John 16:2.

the Jewish believers and he is saying, “Remember the former days,” meaning back when you were persecuted.

Remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one. Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.<sup>3</sup>

The writer is encouraging the Jewish believers to remember the time when you gave it all up. Remember the time when you were persecuted. Such persecution of the Church by the Jewish leaders is documented throughout the book of Acts.

Turn to Acts chapter 14. Paul gives testimony to the persecution in the book of Corinthians. He said to the Corinthian Church, he said, “Of the Jews five times I received forty lashes save one.”<sup>4</sup> Five times, 39 lashes.

Acts 14 verses three through five.

For a long time they stayed speaking boldly in the Lord which gave testimony unto the Word of his grand and granted signs and wonders to be done by their hands. But the multitude of the city was divided and part held with the Jews and part with the apostles. And when there was an assault made both of the Gentiles and also of the Jews with their rulers to use them despitefully and to stone them.<sup>5</sup>

In Acts 14 verse 19 it says, “And there came certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium who persuaded people and having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city supposing him to be have been dead.”<sup>6</sup>

It was not only, of course, the religious leaders, but also the secular authorities that persecuted and murdered the Church. In Acts chapter 12 verses one and two it says:

Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hand to vex certain of the church and kill James the brother of John with the sword.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus warned the disciples of such persecution in John 16. Look at verse two. John 16:2, “Yes, the time is coming,” he says, “that whoever kills you, whoever kills you will think that he offers God service.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 10:32-35.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:24.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 14:3-5.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 14:19.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 12:1-2.

The word for “service” there is the same word rendered elsewhere in the Scripture “worship.” So the idea here that is being conveyed is that what is coming upon the disciples, this time of persecution that is coming upon the disciples was one whereby those who were going to be killing them, that as they were killing Christians they would consider it an act of worship. They would consider it as if they were offering, making an offering to God. They believed that they were doing God’s Word by killing the Christians.

And history bears witness of this as much of the killing of the early Christians were done by the zealots of who it is written in the Talmud—which is the Jewish writings of the time—that they had a zeal for the cause of God.

And we can think of the horror through our history of persecution that has come in the name of God in one way or another from the Inquisition to the Crusades. How many times has there been persecution of one or another group coming in the name of the Church, in the name of God. And it is a tragedy that religious men can consider persecution in line with God’s will.

Even to this day you have the religious fundamentalists strapping bombs to themselves attempting to take as many lives along with their own. They believe they are offering a service to God. They believe they are worshipping God. Zeal is not an indication of truth. True zeal does not lesson sin. True zeal does not take away from the fact that they are sinning in persecuting. And such a crime is not changed by putting the name of God on to it.

He goes on chapter 16 verse three, “And these things they will do to you, because they have not known the Father, nor me.”<sup>9</sup> He is not speaking about a possibility here. “These things they will do.”<sup>10</sup> This is certain terms.

I am reminded of Paul’s Words to Timothy in 2 Timothy chapter three verse 12. He says, “Yea, all that will live godly in Christ will suffer persecution. All that will live godly in Christ shall suffer, will suffer.”<sup>11</sup> No ifs, not buts about it. God knows the future.

And so that we would be prepared, he tells us ahead of time. And he tells us what we can expect even about the future so that when it comes we are prepared. Thus, instead of bringing difficulty to our faith, when we are persecuted we don’t think it strange. When there are trials we think it not strange. Instead of it being a snare that will ultimately shipwreck our faith, the very trial when it comes, we say, “This was prophesied. So it strengthens our faith because it provides proof of God’s omniscience.” That is exactly what Jesus is saying here in verse four, John 16, verse four.

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<sup>8</sup> John 16:2.

<sup>9</sup> John 16:3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Timothy 3:12.

“But these things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them.”<sup>12</sup>

Jesus didn't tell them about persecution to cause them to fear. A lot of times we think if we pick up Fox's *Book of Martyrs* it is going to cause us to fear and we don't want to read it. Jesus doesn't tell us about persecution to cause us to fear. Likewise, as we hear today, I am going to give an account of the history of the Church, Christians throughout the world even today that are being persecuted. It is not for the purpose of bringing fear. It is so that we might be prepared.

Turn to 1 Peter chapter four.

The Church cannot say that we have not been warned that there will be persecution. There will be trials. There will be trouble. True believers need to embrace trials, embrace persecution as a blessing from God. For we know our home is not in this world. When persecution comes we know. When the martyrs were being martyred they would say, “We are not worthy to be persecuted. We are not worthy. This puts us in a category with the prophets. This puts us in a category with our Lord himself who was put to death without a cause. We are not worthy to be persecuted.”

Jesus said, “If they persecuted me, they are going to persecute you also. A servant is not greater than his master, is he?”<sup>13</sup>

Peter wrote in 1 Peter four verse 12 to 14:

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified.<sup>14</sup>

Paul wrote to the Romans in Romans chapter eight, verses 16 and 17.

The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.<sup>15</sup>

2 Corinthians chapter one verses six and seven says:

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<sup>12</sup> John 16:4.

<sup>13</sup> See John 15:20.

<sup>14</sup> 1 Peter 4:12-14.

<sup>15</sup> Romans 8:16-17.

But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.<sup>16</sup>

Oh, we like to be comforted. We love to hear words of comfort. We love to hear how we are co heirs with Christ. We love to hear of the comfort of the day to come. But scriptural comfort... there is a scriptural condition here to that comfort. Blessing and comfort is tied to suffering and persecution. And a brand of Christianity that teaches one without the other is not biblical. Only in America where we have experienced 350 years of uninterrupted prosperity can we export this kind of religion purported to be Christianity as it claims that it is the common Christian experience to possess health, wealth, physical prosperity and blessings apart from suffering and persecution. That is the theology of glory. And the theology of glory has found a fertile soil here in American ground.

One wonders whether our freedom in this nation has been a curse, a curse for the cause of Christ rather than a blessing. So while it is true the United States has certainly—because of the freedom here—has certainly sent out more missionaries than any other nation, at the same time it is also responsible for sending out the greatest number of heretics and apostates as well who spread a false gospel to the ends of the earth.

And we must expect, beloved, we must expect that the Christian road of discipleship is a hard one. The blessing of Christianity is that it may indeed cost us our lives. If we are not prepared for that we do not have a biblical Christianity. We have an American religion. It ahs been the common Christian experience of our brothers and sisters in ages past to suffer.

Let's look at this. We have already seen from the book of Acts this week and last week and the epistles how Paul and the apostles suffered. They suffered at the hands of the religious Jewish people of the time. We saw how James was martyred by Herod. We saw how Peter and John were imprisoned by the Jewish leadership in Acts chapter four. Another time they were imprisoned by the Sadducees. They were freed by an angel in Acts chapter five. The New Testament recounts the stoning of Stephen Acts chapter six. Stephen's execution was followed by a major persecution of Christians in Acts chapter eight by a man named Saul of Tarsus who threw many Christians into prison, who stood by while Steven was being stoned.

After he became a Christian in Acts chapter nine it reports the Jews in Damascus tried to kill Paul. Another attempt on his life was made by the Grecians, a group of Hellenistic Jews in Acts chapter nine.

Later on in history during the famous Bar Kochba rebellion in AD 135 Christians refused to fight and the result of it was, according to Justin Martyr, he writes, "They were

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<sup>16</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:6-7.

commanded to be punished severely if they did not deny Jesus as the Messiah and blaspheme him.”

In the early sixth century Jews joined Chosroes II who was the King of Persia to take Jerusalem by storm in 614 AD and 90,000 Christians were said to have perished. According to the Jewish Encyclopedia the immediate results of these wars filled the Jews with joy. Many Christians became Jews through fear. To this day in Israel the Israeli government has intentionally denied residence visas to Christian clergy as well as Messianic Jews.

So, indeed, throughout history Jesus’ words are true. “They will, un-synagogue you. They will put you out of the synagogue. They will cast you from the nation of Israel.” How true these words have rung throughout history.

Persecution, though, has not only been at the hands of the Jewish people, of course. The persecution at the hands of Rome was even greater. The New Testament records that Paul in his mission was imprisoned on several occasions by Roman authorities. Christian tradition reports that he was executed in Rome. Christian tradition reports that Peter was likewise executed in Rome by crucifixion. In AD 64 a great fire broke out in Rome. It destroyed vast portions of the city. They were economically devastated. And the Roman emperor at the time, Nero, who was widely suspected of setting the fire himself, history records that to get rid of the report that was coming against him, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted torture on a class hated for their abomination called Christian.

By implicating the Christians for this act of arson, Nero successfully capitalized on something that was happening in his day that was there was an already exiting public idea that this new religious sect was upsetting people. It was upsetting their comfort. They were stirring up trouble in the land. This had already gotten.... This was a grass roots thing. And Nero was just capitalizing on what was already there.

Forms of execution used by the Romans included systematic murder, crucifixion, feeding Christians to lions. Their death was made a subject of sport. They would wrap up Christians in the hides of wild beasts and throw them to dogs. And dogs would tear them to pieces. They nailed them to crosses. They set them on fire to use them as torches at night.

It was believed by the early Christians that Nero would return as the antichrist.

Christianity was considered a threat because of its claims that it made that it was the only true faith. That was their sin, that speaking the words of Jesus, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by Me.”<sup>17</sup> It offended people It upset their comfort in their sin.

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<sup>17</sup> John 14:6

Christianity was considered a threat because it claimed to be the only true universal faith and it was making converts. People were turning to the coming to the faith from every sect, attracting Greeks, attracting Romans. It was growing and growing, refusing to compromise with any form of idolatry, threatening the existence of the Roman religion, the state religion of Rome.

Then there were the conscientious refusal of Christians to pay divine honor to the emperor and to take any part in any idolatrous ceremonies at their public festivals.

Also, there was a close brotherly union that they had. They had their frequent meetings. They met on the Lord's Day. They met in their homes during the week. They would be getting together, breaking bread together and they didn't understand. It made them a target of suspicion of hostility. The emperors and the Roman people believed that they were meeting to conspire against them.

The common people had polytheistic ideas. They abhorred the idea of one God. This would limit them. One God, how could we say this? And they actually called the Christians Atheists and enemies of the gods. They readily gave credence to slanderous rumors that at these Christian meetings what was going on was incest and cannibalism. And people believed these things and regarded the frequent calamity that fell upon Rome during this time, they regarded them as punishment from the gods, that the gods were angry because of the Christian's disregard of their worship.

In North Africa there arose the proverb, "If God does not send rain, lay it to the Christians."

So at every flood or drought or famine or pestilence, the people would cry out, "Away with these atheists. To the lions with the Christians."

And by the mid second century mobs of people incited and regularly would drag Christians out of their homes and throw stones at them.

Roman Emperor Domitian who reigned between AD 81 and 96 called himself the Lord God. He treated Christianity as a crime against the state and he condemned many Christians to death with the charge of Atheism. He had their properties confiscated.

Tradition assigns, by the way, to the reign of Domitian the banishment of John to Patmos; also the martyrdom of Andrew, Mark and Onesimus.

Later on Emperor Trajan, one of the best emperors, praiseworthy emperors and under him Pliny, called Christianity and depraved and immoderate superstition, but they could not account for its popularity. It was constantly spreading, captivating according to what they said... people from every age, rank, sex so that the temples... their own temples were being forsaken. And to stop it Pliny condemned many Christians and he writes he even would apply the rack to tender women.



A man by the name of Simeon, 120 years old, a Bishop of Jerusalem was crucified at 120 years old in AD 107.

Around AD 110 Bishop Ignatius of Antioch was condemned to death, transported to Rome and thrown before wild beasts in the Coliseum. Yet despite it all, despite the heightened persecution, it forced people to consider the faith all the more and the faith continued to spread with an irresistible power.

The next emperor, Hadrian, a scholar, an artist, opposed both Judaism and Christianity. And he insulted the Jews and Christians alike by erecting temples to Jupiter and Venus on the very side of the temple and the site of the crucifixion.

In AD 155 Polycarp, who was a personal disciple and friend of the apostle John, he was an elder at the Church of Smyrna, he was martyred at the age of 86. And he joyfully went up to the stake and he was burned at the stake and amidst the flames praised God having deigned to be this worthy to die in this way.

As he... as it is quoted, to be numbered among his martyrs, to drink the cup of Christ's suffering unto the eternal resurrection of the soul and the body in the incorruption of the Holy Spirit.

And with this death it was believed they finally took care of Christianity because they took care of the last witness to the disciples. The last witness of the apostolic age was dead and they believed the Christian witness was dead. But it was not.

Next Marcus Aurelius, the philosopher, well educated, just and kind, amiable emperor for the most part. He also dismissed Christianity, but on a educated level. He considered it absurd and a fanatical superstition. And during his reign the attack on Christianity began to be with the pen. As it is said, the pen is mightier than the sword. And it was written that during this time that the demon, referring to the Christian, the demon were not only reviled, but banished from every land and sea. They believed they took care of this once and for all.

Meanwhile the emperor was devastated as flood after flood came and destroyed the nation, destructive flood and earthquake and insurrection and pestilence from Ethiopia to France. They needed someone to blame it on. So the pen had already destroyed the sect of Christians. They gave rise to bloody persecutions in which the government and the people united against these enemies of God who were the supposed authors of this misfortune.

In 166 Justin Martyr was martyred as a result.

In 177 the churches in South France underwent severe trials. Unbelieving slaves were actually forced by torture to testify against their Christian masters. They were forced to testify lies that their Christian masters raped them and had incest and cannibalism in their homes. And they used the coerced testimony to imprison and execute the Christians.

Clement of Alexandria wrote of these times. He said, “Many martyrs are daily burned, confined or beheaded before our eyes.”

There is a witness.

But the sufferers were refreshed by the fountain of living water. They displayed extraordinary faith and steadfastness believing that nothing could separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

In the beginning of the third century Severus, another emperor, violently persecuted Christians in Egypt and North Africa.

In Alexandria the father of Origen, Leonidas was beheaded.

An young woman by the name of Potamiaena was slowly burned with her mother in boiling pitch. One of the executioners to witness this, a man by the name of Basilides, sympathized with them and with her attempting to shield her from the abuse. And soon after their death embraced Christianity and himself was beheaded.

Perpetua, a young woman, daughter of noble birth, a mother of a nursing child sacrificed the deep and tender feelings that a daughter has for her father and a mother has for her child and she considered the reproaches of Christ greater riches than the treasures of this world choosing rather to suffer for the Lord. And she was cast to the wild beasts at a public festival.

Persecution didn't end here with Severus and his successors. His successors continued to execute Christian leaders and pastors. There was Cyprian of Carthage, a nobleman, well known among the leaders, the worldly leaders of the time, but called to be a faithful pastor. And he received a death sentence to which he went quietly and confidently.

The last and most violent persecution of the Christians by the Roman Empire came with the last emperor of the old Roman Empire Diocletian. And his was so bad that all the former persecutions were all but forgotten in the horror of this one as it is looked back as the last and greatest. He had the fiendish cruelty of Nero, the jealous fears of Domitian, the clever devices of Marcus, all those things in one. And all the other things when compared to the concentrated terrors of this final grapple which resulted in the end of the empire.

In the first 20 years of Diocletian's reign he actually respected Christians. His own wife Prisca, his daughter Valeria, most of his servants, his court officers were Christians. But Diocletian's son-in-law, Galerius, convinced Diocletian in his old age to authorize the greatest persecution on the Church in history up to that time. And in 303 AD Diocletian issued three rapid edicts, one after the other which included that Christian churches would be burned and destroyed, that all copies of the Bible would be burned, that

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<sup>18</sup> See Romans 8:39.

Christians were going to be deprived of their civil rights and that, last of all, without exception, they were to sacrifice to the gods under pain of death.

And the historian Eusebius writes, who was a witness of this persecution, and he writes of how houses of prayer were flattened to the ground. Holy Scriptures were burned in the market places. Pastors were hunted and tortured and torn to pieces in amphitheaters for sport. And all at the same time the Christians sang hymns and praised and gave thanksgiving to God in honor of God even to their last breath.

And at the same time, of course, there were those who fell away. There were those so called disciples who actually joined in, going to their brothers and sisters homes, confiscating Bibles and bringing them to the market places to be burned just to show, hey, we are with you.

Many of these superficial and hypocritical Christians joined the church during the 40 years of peace—quote, unquote—that was leading up to this final persecution. Remember there were 20 years where Diocletian was favorable upon Christians and 20 years to the emperor before or emperors before where there was peace. Many of these Christians joined the church over that time.

And now in the moment of storm, in the moment of persecution, it breaks forth like chaff from the wheat. They gladly offer incense to the gods. They willingly pronounce false witness against their brothers. They give up their Scripture, their Bibles.

Tertullian relates that whole congregations, whole congregations from the pastor down with the clergy at the head would resort to bribes, giving bribes to avert persecution.

These were those of whom John spoke in the Scripture. “They were with us, but they were never us, for if they were of us they wouldn’t have left us.”<sup>19</sup>

Though there were some traitors, the overwhelming witness of the Church remained. As persecution raged, the zeal and the fidelity of Christians increased. To the cruel persecution that was upon them, the Church returned no violence, no carnal resistance, only moral heroism of suffering and dying for the truth. And it as the Heroism, this heroism that was the staunchest weapon that she had in her hand. It was the very heroism that proved the Church to be an example of Christ who submitted himself unto death on a cross for the sin of the world.

Men and women of all classes, noble senators, learned bishops, illiterate poor slaves loving mothers, young women, pastors, innocent children, they all approached their torturers as Christ did with calm, humble resignation, gentle, meekness, cheerful faith, triumphant hope and forgiving charity.

These are the ones who the book of Revelation chapter 12 verse 11 speaks of. “And they

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<sup>19</sup> See 1 John 2:19

overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony.”<sup>20</sup> Their μαρτυρία (mar-too-ree’-ah), their martyrdom, their testimony, “and they loved not their lives unto the death.”<sup>21</sup>

It was at times like these, the things that kept them going were the words of Christ, the words of the Lord.

“And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.”<sup>22</sup>

“He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.”<sup>23</sup>

“Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>24</sup>

:He that loses his life for my sake shall find it.”<sup>25</sup>

Tertullian wrote as he taunted the heathen governors. He said, “Go on. Go on. Rack, torture, grind us to powder. Our numbers increase in proportion as you mow us down. The blood of the Christians is the harvest seed. Your very obstinacy is a teacher. For who is not incited by the contemplation of it to inquire why you do this and who, after having joined us, does not long to suffer?”

Of course, the persecution didn’t end with Rome and time doesn’t permit me to detail all of the persecution of Christian history: the hands of the Persians, the dynasties of China and Japan and Egypt and in the Middle East, not to mention the persecution of Christians at the hands of the—quote, unquote—Church with a capital C.

Just a few in the previous century, the Ottoman Empire systematically murdered 1.5 million Armenian Christians between 1915 and 1917.

Today in the Sudan it is estimated over 1.5 million Christians in South Sudan have been killed by Islamic Sudanese army in the north.

In Pakistan Islamic militants killed 15 Christians while they were in church. Terrorists another eight Christians by shooting them in the head after they separated out Muslims from Christians at an embassy.

In Indonesia the Islamists stated aim is the complete elimination of Christianity. And militant Muslims have orchestrated an Islamic Jihad against Christians, killing thousands, destroying hundreds of churches. Islamic organizations in Indonesia are responsible for

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<sup>20</sup> Revelation 12:11.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Luke 14:27.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 10:37.

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 5:10.

<sup>25</sup> See Matthew 16:25.

500 Christian churches being burned down. This was in one year, in 1998. Five hundred Christian churches being burned down in Java, 22 churches in Jakarta were burned down and 13 Christians killed, 800 homes and stores owned by Christians were destroyed in Paco on Easter Sunday in 1998 alone.

In June 2001 the Laskar Jihad—all this is in Indonesia—declared Jihad against Christians and Muslim citizens were recruited by thousands to exterminate Christians. Areas in central Sulosi in the Moloku Islands where Christians are in the majority were actually subject to outright military attack.

In September 2005 three Sunday school teachers were sentenced to three years in prison for proselytizing Muslim children whose parents sent them to that place.

Less than a year ago Muslim mobs forced the closure of at least 60 churches.

And despite all of this, despite it all in the last 40 years in Indonesia? Evangelicals have grown from 1.3 million to 11.5 million. The increased Christian persecution has brought a greater purity among the body of Christ there in both prayer and activity to help the believers in that nation.

It has motivated people from around the world to help the Christians in these lands. In Saudi Arabia Christians are arrested and lashed in public for practicing their faith openly. Bibles are confiscated, piled up and burned by religious police. We are talking about today. No non Muslims are allowed to become Saudi citizens. Prayer services by Christians are frequently broken up by the police and the Christians are arrested and tortured. And people who convert to Christianity are, can officially be executed.

In Iran Muslims convert to Christianity. They are arrested and often executed. In the Philippines the Moro Islamic Liberation Front has attacked and killed Christians.

Richard Wurmbrand the author of *Tortured for Christ* describes the systematic persecution of Christians in the Eastern Block nations of what was the Soviet Union.

Many Christian believers from the former Soviet Union have spoken about how they were imprisoned for now other reason than their belief in God.

In Albania Enver Hoxha conducted a campaign to extinguish all forms of religion in 1967.

Persecution of Christians has continued in this area of the world that was formerly the Soviet Union and exists today in many of the Eastern Europe nations, notably Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Belarus.

The Communist government of the People's Republic of China today continues to maintain tight control over all religions. It allows some churches, state recognized churches that they can control what is spoken about in those churches. They confiscate

church property. They confiscate Bibles that they even print in their own nation. The house church movement, as a result, which is the illegally unregistered churches in China, comprise approximately 90% of the Christian population in China. And in 2004 there was a major crackdown by the government against unregistered church groups and several hundred Christians were arrested including a 28 year old Christian teacher, 34 year old female evangelist were among the Christians who were beaten to death while in police custody in 2004.

In 2005 in China 100 security officers from the Chinese government raided a conference of 140 house church leaders and 10 guest pastors in Northeastern China. They endured unimaginable persecution, yet they remained standing, preaching the gospel no matter what the cost.

In India on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1999 Graham Staines, an Australian Christian missionary and his two sons, eight and 10, were burned to death in the state of Orissa by members of a Hindu nationalist group in India. So it is not only the Muslims either.

In September of 2002 eight Christian missionaries were beaten during a worship service by Hindu fundamentalists.

Muslim extremists in Bangladesh often deny Christians access to public water wells and force them out of their homes and eat them.

The nation of Colombia which claims a Christian population of 95% today marks its guerilla groups demand war tax from churches. And they kidnap people and they threaten missionaries and they force Christian schools and churches to close. And despite the fear and intimidation at these Marxist guerillas, have in this land, the church has grown. In 1933 there were 15,000 Evangelicals, but in 2000 there were almost two million.

And we could go on and on and on and give you example and example and example of persecutions.

You know, there is some example of persecution somewhere in the world every day. You can go on the internet and you can find a report of persecution somewhere in the world every day, somewhere outside of the United States.

But what about us? Are we spared? Have we been spared? What does all this have to do with us? What does it have to do with us in the United States, the land of the free and the home of the brave?

The words of Jesus are timeless. And though he spoke of the imminent persecution that was coming on the disciples at that time, his words are no less important for us, that the disciples, yes, were about to face imminent persecution, but the call to suffer as a disciples extends beyond the apostles. It includes everyone that who is going to follow Jesus Christ.

This week we celebrated the 230<sup>th</sup> birthday of this land, perhaps the most prosperous of all nations in the history of the world. And while enjoying prosperity and freedom, the Christian Church in America has suffered. And I use that word, yes, suffered from over 350 years of prosperity. We have suffered from our prosperity.

Throughout American history being Christian has been viewed as good, patriotic, culturally acceptable, even beneficial. It is only in this age are we starting to see that change. As a result of this we have become ingrained, we have this massively unbiblical mindset, a mindset that we are at home in this world. We have this assumption that things should go well for us. After all we are Christians. We are entitled to something as Christians. We are entitled to be well thought of. We are Christian.

Much of what constitutes the Church in America today has unknowingly adopted a post millennial theonomic view that teaches that our nation now is the head and not the tail. We have suddenly become Israel. We have become a land in the Middle East. And in every promise there is specifically applied to our nation, only the good ones, of course.

And, as a result, an American religion has come about. And it is a new religion. It is a new religion of our day, very foreign from biblical Christianity. And that is the reason why pastors could get up and evangelists can get up and make an appeal to the masses based upon their felt needs. Come to Christ and this will be taken care of and that will be taken care of, suggesting that if one adopts the Christian faith your life is going to be a whole lot better. They really believe that. Your life is going to become a whole lot better in this world is a promise that many evangelists are making today. The gospel of this religion rarely, if ever, calls people to suffer as an alien. But it calls people to prosper as respected citizens.

When pastors in China hear that churches in the United States are praying for them, they actually say, “No, no, no. We need to pray for you.” They need to pray for us because they know that we are in the midst of the temptations of the world and that because of the freedom that we have, the temptations are greater than those that come in their land where there is persecution.

And, as a result, the Church is not purified. We haven’t been under the fire of persecution. We haven’t been purified.

And the result when God has not been purified, it accumulates dross. And that is the state of the Church. Because why? It stands unprepared.

Jesus’ words in John chapter 15 and 16 were to prepare his people for persecution. And he did so that when it would come they would not stumble, they would not fall into a trap.

The disciples wouldn’t have the wool pulled over their eyes. They knew what it meant to be a Christian. They knew what it meant to carry their cross and follow him, to take up their cross and follow him. They were fully informed of what it meant to be a disciple

because Christ didn't hold anything back from them. He fully disclosed to them all of the painful features. He did not hide the cost.

Yet the Church today hides the cost. It says, "Be a disciple, come on in."

Maybe they know about it, but they are not telling you about it. While it is, indeed, true, it is certainly true that being a Christian holds many blessings and many benefits even in this life, both in this life and the life to come, certainly in the life to come. But the American religion has placed a focus on our blessings here in this world and it emphasizes that which the Bible does not emphasize. We have elevated this relatively minor temporal blessing to a place that it is so high and so dominant in the thinking of the Church. So it causes us to have expectations of what it means to be a Christian.

Well, if we are a Christian we should be this. It has nothing to do with the New Testament pattern of Christian suffering. And to talk about suffering today to most of the Church seems almost unreasonable.

A follower of the American can hardly grasp what it was like to be a Christian in the first century and what God may, may, may be calling us to today. And therein lies the main reason, or one of the main reasons why the Church in America is so anemic. We are at home in this world. We are looking for temporal blessings.

The early Christians were aliens and exiles whose true home was heaven. That world was so real to them, heaven, the future was so real to them, it was so precious to them that they did the unthinkable and rejoiced in their suffering. Unthinkable, isn't it? Rejoiced in your suffering.

And the key to that joy was that in the midst of danger, amidst the loss it was simply they were not placing their stock in this world. They had been transformed and they knew it, into the kingdom of God's Son. They had passed from death to life. Their lives were hid with Christ in God and all of that meant something. So persecution was considered momentary and light in the light of eternity. And this had been the pattern wherever Christianity has shined the brightest even in the world today.

Are we to expect America to be exempt, that if we are going to have a pure Church in America that it is going to come apart from persecution?

Hebrews talks about the time coming when the... everything that can be shaken will be shaken. Are we ready? Are you prepared?

I believe a pattern is emerging that is reminiscent in this country of Nero's Rome, of the young Church, the Ottoman Empire, of Hitler's Germany. There is nothing new under the sun, you know. And we could expect that in every generation that experiences great trials that there is going to be a seeking of a scapegoat for those trials.



In the United States today we are seeing an ever increasing isolation, discrimination against Christians. Dignitaries are fighting arm in arm with Muslims to keep political cartoons in movies that depict Mohammed out of American newspapers and theaters while Jesus Christ is the only God who is fair game to be mocked and to be distorted.

A man by the name of Don McIlvaine, he writes in *The Midnight Herald*. He says, "This is the way it started in Germany against the Jews, that they became more isolated and marginalized by Nazi propaganda, by the Nazi propaganda machine as popular hatred and prejudice against the Jews increased among the German people, wholesale persecution followed. Could this be where the growing anti Christian consensus in America is taking us?"

Tolerance against anti Christian attitudes in the United States has been escalating if you haven't noticed.

Last year a woman in Houston, Texas was ordered by the police to stop handing out gospel tracts to children who knocked on her door for Halloween.

In Madison, Wisconsin the Freedom of Religion Foundation distributed anti Christian pamphlets in the public schools that say, "We can be good without God."

The entertainment industry, the *daVinci Code*, vilifying Christians or the gospel, just like they did in Marcus' Rome. The pen is mightier than the sword.

Let's get the populists to agree with us. Nothing new.

Recently the Council of Religious Leaders, the Council of Religious Leaders... it sounds like... that sounds like someone who should be pretty good, right? Well, they warned against the Southern Baptists holding a convention in Chicago saying that their presence there might instigate hate crimes and violence. All this while around the world Christianity itself is the target of hate crimes and violence.

There is a concerted effort to convince the public school children today in America that America was not founded on Christian ideals. There are history revisionists taking things out of textbooks. This is documented prove stuff. History eliminating any and all historical evidence from public school curriculum.

The Puritans... I remember growing up and learning about how the Puritans were this peace loving group who came to the United States to escape the persecution in England, to spread the gospel in the new land. This was considered a good thing. Well, today they are painted as hate mongers, responsible for wiping out the indigenous and idolatrous American Indian culture.

A few years ago there was a study done by a psychology professor at NYU and he worked with a committee and they examined 60 social studies and history text books. And the committee examined these for references to Christian influence in early

America. And what they found was over time things were systematically removed from the text books that related specifically to the role of Christians and their influence in American... the formation of the country.

Their conclusion was the writers of the commonly used text books exhibit paranoia of the Christian religion and intentionally censored Christianity's positive role in American history.

Indicators reveal that this blame game that is going on against western Christians, Christians in America is working. People are starting to believe it. And it is a downward trend that this country is going in, it continues with all of the business and all of the industry going to foreign lands.

If this country loses its influential force in the world that it has had for the past over 100 years, be sure that there are going to be societies at least out there looking for a scapegoat. And who do you think is number one on their list? We have already got new age authors writing books about our next step, the next step of the evolution of mankind. And they are saying that for man to evolve is going to require the extinction of closed minded groups because our next evolutionary step is the mind. So if we have closed minded groups in our midst, it is going to hold us back.

So, since man is a animal according to these people, according to the laws of nature, according to Darwin and survival of the fittest, well, they have a natural right to get rid of those that are holding back their evolutionary jump. Is that too far fetched?

This is... I am not talking about conspiracy theories here. I am talking about general underlying principles that are... people are beginning to think this way. I don't believe it is far fetched for us to imagine the recurrence of public persecution and humiliation of Christians even being embraced by the mainstream.

The question is, though, how will we deal with it? How will the church deal with this? I suspect, just as those who came in the time of just before Diocletian in that 40 years, I suspect that many will fall away just as they did in the 40 years of peace. But how should it affect us?

Turn to Hebrews, the book of Hebrews 13. I will close there.

We look at all of this and you hear all of the persecution and you hear all of the systematic murder, the wiping out of Christians throughout the world, throughout history. And we look at it and fail to see something greater here. And it is a common fault and a common folly of Christians to look only on the dark side of the cloud, to turn a deaf ear to the joy of gladness.

We say, "How could they have been singing hymns? How could they have gone to those stakes quoting the Scripture?"

We often fail to see the dark providence of God, the hand of God behind the intensity of the deep trials that one is in. And if that be true of you, if you have a hard time seeing God in those things, if you have a hard time understanding how it could be that God would have a mother and a daughter boiled in the pitch together, you have a hard time seeing that, the hymn writer would admonish you.

He says:

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust him for his grace.  
Behind a frowning providence,  
He hides a smiling face.

What should be our response? Hebrews 13. Look at verses 12 to 14.

Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. So let us go out to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we do not have a lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come.<sup>26</sup>

Christ did not die to make the United States a paradise. He died so that we would become willing to stop trying to make a paradise in our own lives in the United States or anywhere we might live.

Why?

Because we are masochistic? No.

Because we love suffering? No.

But because we are seeking a city which is to come. There is our response. We are seeking a city that is to come. Our motive for bearing his reproach is that there is a city that is coming and it is better than what this age offers because it is going to last forever and best of all God is going to be there and we are going to be glorifying him forever in undiminished glory. What the early Church shared with the persecuted Church in the lands today is this radical confidence that this is true, that we are going to have a glorious future with God. And when this truth takes hold of you, you are going to be sanctified.

Sanctify his people through his own blood so let us go outside the camp bearing his reproach.

John wrote about it. This blessed hope, if it is truly a blessed hope in you, it purifies you.

May God use this not to bring fear, not to bring anxiety about what might happen to us. But to shake us loose of the reliance that we have upon our comforts. My prayer this

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<sup>26</sup> Hebrews 13:12-14.

morning is that among us, among all that are hearing this, that God would use it shake up to the foundation, to loosen up, to loosen the hold that the American religion has upon us.

Why? So that we could look forward to things that are above. So that we will not shrink back when the time comes of those trials. Because we are not of those that will shrink back so that we will embrace that which is eternal even in the here and now.

What is eternal in the here and now? The comfort that the Holy Spirit brings. Remember the promise of the Comforter comes along with the promise of persecution. So we will embrace that.

In 1956 Jim Eliot, Pete Fleming, Ed McCully, Ned Saint and Roger Youderian were killed in Ecuador bearing witness to one of the tribes in that land. And Elizabeth Eliot's account of their martyrdom there is a line from the hymn, "We go not forth alone."

And shortly before their death they sang this hymn. And Eliot writes this. "The close of their prayers, the five men sang one of their favorite hymns, "We rest on thee," to the stirring tune of *Finlandia*. Jim and Ed had sung this hymn in their college days and knew the verses by heart. On the last verse their voices rang out with deep conviction.

We rest on thee, our shield and our defender.  
Thine is the battle, thine shall be the praise.  
When passing through the gates of pearly splendor,  
Victors. We rest with thee through endless days.

What should be our response? Shall we fear? Shall we shrink back?

Some will. But shall we in the face of persecution?

No. Because with the promise of persecution, comes the promise of even greater comfort. So let us embrace persecution that we may embrace the Comforter all the more.

Beloved, rather than causing fear, may this text in John chapter 16 verses one through four may it do for us what it was to do for the disciples when Jesus spoke it to them. May it prepare us and fill us with a longing to be free from our comfort seeking, entertainment addicted American religion and truly turn to what it means to know Christ in the fellowship of his suffering.

Amen.