

PERSECUTION

Background

When we talk about the suffering church we refer to the persecuted church, in other words the church that suffers because it owns the name of Christ. It is true that sometimes believers suffer for other reasons – perhaps because of their own rebellion against God, perhaps because of their indifference to social or moral evil which leads in turn to spiritual weakness. In this study we consider suffering only in the context of persecution.

The people of God are no strangers to persecution. The entire Bible witnesses not only to God's goodness, justice and mercy, but also to the devil's opposition to God, which manifests itself in opposition to God's people in particular, and to humanity in general. Right back in the earliest parts of the Bible we see persecution of the righteous by the unrighteous. Righteousness stands in contrast – and opposition – to evil. Evil will not countenance righteousness and so opposes it.

In the Old Testament

The earliest persecution we encounter in the Bible was of Abel by his brother Cain, recorded in Genesis chapter 4. Abel's sacrifice was acceptable to God, whilst Cain's sacrifice was not. As men try to build their own righteousness before God, whether through politics, humanism, or false religions, these same men are angered by *the one sacrifice* that is acceptable to God, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God's Son. Cain murdered his brother on account of Abel's goodness compared to Cain's shabbiness. (And see Matthew 23:35; and 1 John 3:12-13). The Old Testament is replete with stories of those who suffered for doing right. We think of Daniel, thrown to the lions, yet who was protected by God. We think of Moses, opposed along with his people, the Hebrews – opposed by Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt. We think of the prophets, many of whom were martyred for delivering God's message without fear or favour to people and to leaders who did not want to listen. We think of David, persecuted by Saul because of God's obvious spiritual blessing of David.

We think of Nehemiah, opposed by Sanballat (and others) as he began to secure the holy city of Jerusalem. We think of Esther and the Jewish people persecuted by Haman, the King's official – reminding us of state opposition to those of faith down through history. Ultimately, those who persecute will fall.

Genesis 4:1–16; Psalm 9:13–16; Psalm 34:17–22; Psalm 41 (many of the Psalms deal with the theme of suffering, and the context of persecution often lurks behind that suffering).

In the New Testament

The Lord Jesus made it very clear that persecution will often be experienced by those who put their trust in him.

Matthew 5:3–12 (especially 11–12); 10:17–42; Mark 13:9; John 15:18 to 16:4

Jesus also made it clear that Christians should have a priority in caring for their brethren – and in this he seems to have had in mind, once again, suffering caused by persecution. Matthew 25:31–46 is relevant in this context, and especially sobering are verses 44–5, where the neglect by the 'goats' appears to have referred to their brothers and sisters in Christ, even more so than any neglect of their neighbours in the wider world.

The early Christians' experience of persecution is described in many places in the New Testament. Jesus himself was persecuted – he was unjustly accused and convicted, suffered mockery and violence, and was executed by the appalling method of crucifixion (Mark 14:43–15:37). The first church in Jerusalem was scattered by persecution (Acts 8:1b–3) and two of its leaders were killed (Acts 7:54–8:1; 12:1–2).

In Paul's list of his sufferings for Christ, he includes imprisonment, flogging, beating and stoning (2 Corinthians 11:23–25). Hebrews was written for Christians whose property had been confiscated (Hebrews 10:34), and the readers of 1 Peter had to bear slander and insults (1 Peter 2:12; 4:3–4). The churches in Revelation had endured hardships including imprisonment and being killed. (Revelation 2:9–10 and 13; cf. 6:9–11).

Several New Testament writers look behind the human causes of persecution to draw out its significance for believers. The book of Revelation attributes some affliction to the devil (see Revelation 2:10). God sets a limit to afflictions and he uses them to work out his plans. (See Acts 11:19–21; 1 Thessalonians 3:2–4; 1 Peter 5:10).

Although persecution is inevitable for Christians, it is also a means of blessing for those who suffer it. The persecutions of Jesus' disciples is linked in the Gospels with the *labour pains of the age to come* (Matthew 24:4–12). Those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness are promised the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:10).

Paul affirms that those who suffer with Christ will also be glorified with him (Romans 8:17). Nor is such blessing only for the future: suffering produces perseverance, character and hope in the present, so that believers can even rejoice in it. (See Romans 5:3–4; James 1:2–3).

Various responses to persecution are found in the New Testament, including flight, appealing to the authorities for protection, and faithful endurance. Different circumstances may call for different responses – even for the same person. So Paul escapes from Damascus when his life is endangered (Acts 9:23–25, cf. 2 Corinthians 11:32–33), and we are reminded of Jesus' instruction to disciples to flee when suffering persecution (Matthew 10:23). But on another occasion Paul makes use of his Roman citizenship to appeal to the emperor, to avoid being handed over to his enemies (Acts 25:11).

Persecution will end

The disciples are not left alone to face their enemies: Jesus will provide them with words and wisdom to defend themselves (Luke 21:12–15). No one can snatch them out of his or his Father's hand (John 10:28–29), and provided they stand firm to the end they will be saved (Matthew 24:13). The first letter of Peter, taken in whole, is sometimes referred to as a manual for living under persecution. It is well worth reading in full with this understanding in mind.

God is not a loser. He will preserve for himself a Church and a holy nation, and those who have been martyred, men, women and children (as they have been all through history), will have a special place in the kingdom of heaven. Where do we learn about the end of the history of persecution? At the end of the Bible, of course! In Revelation chapter 6 we read of John the apostle's vision of the seals being opened. When the fifth seal is opened, he sees the souls of all those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They ask God openly how long it will be before he judges and their blood is avenged. They are told to wait a little longer, until the last of the martyrs is gathered in to heaven. At 7:13-17 (read this carefully) we discover the glorious climax. Finally, in 19:6-9, we are shown that persecution is not the end: there is to be the wedding supper of the Lamb.

Our Lord Jesus will return for his bride, the Church. What an ending! Hallelujah indeed!

Note

This Study is closely linked to Unit 49, although much of the material is different, justifying two studies on related themes.