

# Appendix 5

## **The Suffering Church** *(cross refer to chapter 14)*

When we talk about the suffering church we are talking about the persecuted church, in other words the church that suffers because it proclaims the name of Jesus Christ. It must be true that sometimes the church suffers for other reasons — perhaps because of its own rebellion against God; perhaps because of its own indifference to social or moral evil, which leads in turn to spiritual weakness. But we turn our attention for a moment to consider suffering in the context of persecution. Jesus said **“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, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”** (Matthew 5:11–12.)

In John chapter 15 (v. 18) Jesus said **“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master’. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name . . . .”** And then in John 16:1, **“All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God.”** In saying that, Jesus was addressing the persecution that would

afflict the immediate disciples and the early church. But He was also addressing all of those who would follow Him. What was true for the disciples of the Bible is true for us today, but not always in such extremes.

The people of God are no strangers to persecution. The entire Holy Bible is a testament 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 all mankind in general. Right back in the earliest parts of the Bible we see persecution of the righteous by the unrighteous. Righteousness is word that the world does not like. The real meaning of righteousness is being right with God (having been justified by Him, by grace through faith) and right living. Righteousness is in contrast to, and in opposition to, evil. Evil will not countenance righteousness. It will not look at righteousness, and so opposes it. Today a popular caricature of the church is that Christians are a lot of self-righteous people thinking how good we are and looking down on everyone else. Ironically, the world fails to understand that whatever righteousness Christians have is not self-righteousness, it is Christ's righteousness. We can only stand before a holy God as His children because our sinless Saviour (that is, our completely and utterly righteous Saviour) has accepted and paid the debt that belongs to us, the debt of our sins.

The earliest persecution we encounter in the Bible was of Abel by his brother Cain, in Genesis chapter 4. Abel's sacrifice was acceptable to God, whilst Cain's sacrifice was not. So Cain was very jealous of Abel and murdered him. In the church we too easily allegorise the account of Cain and Abel, tending to turn it into a sort of myth. It seems to the author to be literally true that as men try to build their own righteousness before God, whether through politics,

or humanism, or religions, these same men are angered by the one sacrifice that is acceptable to God, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, His Son. It seems to the author to be most likely that the account of Cain and Abel is literally true, that Cain murdered his brother on account of Abel's goodness compared to Cain's shabbiness. The Bible is replete with stories of those who suffered for doing right. We think of Daniel, thrown to the lions, yet protected by God. We think of Moses, opposed along with his people — the Hebrew slaves — by Pharaoh, the dictator 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.

Our Lord Jesus repeatedly warned of persecution for those who follow him. Even within households — that brother would betray brother and children would betray parents. Jesus pointed out that even the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head (Matt 8:20) — so His followers should not expect an easy ride. Jesus told us not to fear when arraigned before the courts. The Holy Spirit will give us the words we need to say in our defence, and just as pertinently, we might add, in Jesus' defence as well. Luke records Jesus as saying:

**“ . . . they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.”** (Luke 21:12-15 ).

In Matthew chapter 10, Jesus also warns of persecutions to

come: **“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.**

**“A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!**

**“So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.**

**Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven. Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother in law’ — a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.”**

**Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.** (Matthew 10:21-39.)

Tough and uncomfortable teaching from our Lord. Every now and then we need to be jolted out of our soft, saccharin idea of ‘gentle Jesus, meek and mild’. Here we encounter the awesome reality of the cost of following Jesus. The Lord Himself is the ultimate realist. He knew what his own death would be. He tells us plainly that to follow Him is no picnic — it never has been and it never will be easy. On account of Jesus, strife will emerge within societies, within friendships, and even within families. So, Jesus’ call to discipleship includes frank warnings of danger, and of reviling, slander, accusation, floggings, arraignment before courts, hatred and death. There is a high cost to following Jesus. The Lord himself would be judicially murdered on the basis of false accusations. Each accusation was a lie, but this did not protect him. In the book of Acts we encounter the first persecutions against the fledgling church. But — and we need always to keep this very much in mind — God is in control. The early church was scattered by persecution and the gospel message of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus spread ever further. The whole epistle of First Peter is about preparing for suffering, preparing for persecution. Readers may want themselves to look up 1 Peter 4:12 – 19 in this regard.

So what do these persecutions have in common? Today, throughout the world, Christians are discriminated against. There is discrimination of society at large and even Britain is not immune from this. We have heard in recent years

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of Christian organisations that have state funding cut off because they refuse to toe the line on some politically correct issue. Throughout the world a favourite persecution tactic is to prevent Christians from building, or even repairing, church buildings. People are beginning to wonder how long it will be in Europe before local councils begin to use planning laws against Christians.

In Islamic countries, as in Hindu, there is an ever greater willingness to discriminate against Christians at an institutional level. So institutions such as the police and judiciary fail to protect minorities, and allow anti-Christian crime to go unpunished. Throughout the world today, another tactic of persecution is in the area of employment. Christians are routinely passed over for promotion. Christians will be dismissed on whatever pretext, and often find it difficult to gain alternative employment. There are also boycotts of Christian businesses, so making it harder for Christians to continue to live where they are. Whilst these persecutions may occasionally be extended to other minorities, it always seems to be most vehement against Christians. Persecution against Jews, that root-stock into which Christianity is in-grafted, requires separate study but, we note, it often accompanies persecution against Christians.

Framing laws to prevent conversion from one religion to another seems especially aimed at Christians. Under Sharia in Islamic societies, a male who converts to is supposed to be executed. And this sometimes happens. More often it is a case of murder — where Governments fear international outcry at the more fundamental aspects of their religious laws, they turn a blind eye when religious fanatics literally take the law into their own hands. In many countries, even where Christianity is theoretically tolerated, there can

be real problems for those who want to worship openly. Limits on the numbers of people who can assemble, and on locations where they can assemble, are favoured tactics in some societies.

The words ‘Christianity’ and ‘persecution’ are almost synonymous. Jesus spoke clearly of the cost that would be incurred by becoming one of his disciples, and around the world today the body of Christ is experiencing great persecution. God commands us to remember our persecuted fellow believers and pray for them as if we were suffering right beside them (see, e.g. Hebrews 13:3).

God is not a loser: He will preserve for himself a Church and a holy nation in spite of persecution of His children. And martyred men, women and children — martyred as they have been down through history — will have a special place in the kingdom of heaven. Where do we find the end of this story? As we might expect, it is at the end of the Bible. We pick up the story in Revelation chapter 6, where John the apostle recounts his vision of heaven’s seals being opened. The fifth seal reveals 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 their blood is avenged. They are told to wait a little longer, until the last of the martyrs are gathered to heaven. Then (in 7:13) we pick up the glorious climax. Those clothed in white robes: . . . **are those who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white, in the blood of the lamb. They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple. And he who sits in the temple will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger or thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the lamb at the centre of the throne**

**will be their shepherd, and he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Revelation 7:13–17).**

Finally, in Revelation 19, John recounts: **Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like peals of thunder, shouting ‘Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him the glory! For the wedding of the lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear’. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints). Then the angel said to me ‘Write: blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the lamb’. And he added, “These are the true words of God.” (Revelation 19:6–8.)**

Persecution today, as in generations past, ends in an eternal wedding feast and our Lord Jesus returning for his bride, the church. What an ending! Hallelujah indeed!