

The Importance of Preparing God's People for Persecution (Jn 15:18 - 16:4)

I. The Apostolic Perspective of Persecution

1. Persecution is both a demonic attack to hinder our spiritual growth and a divine gift to enhance it. God granted and appointed that His people endure persecution (1 Thes. 3:3; Phil. 1:29) that they may be transformed by it for their great benefit in this age and in the age to come. We do not make persecution happen to us in the will of God—it is granted as a divine opportunity that we don't have unless God grants it to us. The apostles rejoiced in being "counted worthy" to suffer knowing how it transformed them and how precious it is to have it in their testimony when they stand before God.

For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ...to suffer for His sake... (Phil. 1:29) ...

[to not be] shaken by these afflictions...know that we are appointed to this. (1 Thes. 3:3)

Our...affliction...is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. (2 Cor. 4:17)

2. The apostles rejoiced in being "counted worthy" to suffer, knowing how it transformed them and how valuable it is to have it in their testimony when they stand before God in the age to come.

They departed...rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer...for His name. (Acts 5:41)

3. The Lord uses persecution to transform His people and to cause them to cease from sin (1 Pet.4:1). Peter assured believers that the spirit of glory will rest on those who are persecuted (1 Pet. 4:14).

...he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, 2 that he no longer should live...for the lusts of men...14 If you are reproached...the Spirit of glory...rests on you... (1 Pet. 4:1-2, 14)

4. Those who faithfully proclaim the truths that Jesus taught will be hated by those who hate Him (Mt. 24:9). Jesus told them to know this hatred is actually against Him and not them. We must settle it in our heart that we will not escape their hatred if we speak the truth about Jesus and His message.

"If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. 19...therefore the world hates you. 20...If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you..."

5. John urged us to anticipate being hated for standing for truth and not be shocked when it happens.

Do not marvel [be shocked or surprised], my brethren, if the world hates you. (1 Jn. 3:13)

6. John 15 is the "intimacy with God" chapter (15:1-17). Intimacy with God is essential to being empowered to walk in joy when being persecuted (15:18-25). Two days earlier, Jesus prophesied that, in the end times just before He returns, "all nations" will hate His disciples (Mt. 24:9).

Hatred with lawlessness is the context in which the gospel will be preached to all nations (Rev. 7:9). In AD 197, the church father Tertullian said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”

All these are the beginning of sorrows [birth pains]. 9 Then...you will be hated by all nations... 12 lawlessness will abound... 14 the gospel...will be preached...to all the nations... (Mt. 24:8-14)

7. Some focus on understanding the end times but without prioritizing intimacy with God, while others focus on intimacy without interest in understanding Jesus’ end-time plan— both are essential! Specifically, this love is love for the Bridegroom King who loved us and gave Himself up for us.

Set Me as a seal upon your heart...for love is as strong as death... (Song 8:6)

They overcame him [Satan]...they did not love their lives to the death. (Rev. 12:11)

8. *Christians enduring persecution in end-time prophecy is a sober reality (Mt. 10:21-22, 28; 24:9; Lk. 21:16-19; Jn. 15:18-25; Rev. 6:9-11; 11:7; 12:11, 17; 13:7, 10; 16:5-7; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4). Several “persecution watch lists” identify 60+ nations that have a high level of persecution against believers. About 300 million believers regularly face “the possibility” of persecution.*
9. *There are important reasons to understand end-time prophecies about persecution— Three applications*
 1. ***Application #1: To arm ourselves to suffer:*** *Peter gave a “military call” to arm or equip ourselves for battle. First, by developing a biblical understanding of persecution— why God allows it to happen, what are the benefits for our personal life, and what are the eternal rewards that follow. Second, by cultivating an intimate relationship with Jesus (Mt. 25:4; Jn. 15:1-17). Third, by cultivating deep kingdom relationships with wholehearted believers.*
...Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind... (1 Pet. 4:1)
 2. ***Application #2: Prepare young believers:*** *We must be intentional to prepare them for this. ...*

[Paul] strengthening the souls of the disciples...saying, “We must through many tribulations enter [experience more of] the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:22)

3. ***Application #3: To help the persecuted Church:*** *We are to help other believers by our prayer, financial support, encouragement. Do a YouTube search of “persecution of Christians.” Voice of the Martyrs is a ministry that supports the persecuted church.*

II. Understanding the Biblical Context of Our Times

1. Scripture describes three prophetic time frames in the end times. This can be seen by comparing Matthew 24 with 1 Thessalonians 5:2-3 and Daniel 9:27. The first time frame is the beginning of birth pains, occurring over a generation, leading up to the final seven years of this age which is made up of two periods each lasting 3 1/2 years—counterfeit world peace and the Great Tribulation.
 1. **Beginning of birth pains** (Mt. 24:4-8; Mk. 13:5-8; Lk 21:8-11)—leading to the final 7 years
 2. **Counterfeit world peace** (increased labor pains)—the first 3 1/2 years of the final 7 years

3. **The Great Tribulation** (hard labor pains)—the last 3 1/2 years of the final 7 years
2. The thing that is birthed includes the end-time harvest of souls, the purifying of the Church, and the return of Jesus to rule and fill the earth with God’s glory in the millennial kingdom. The pressure of the birth pains also creates the context for the Antichrist to come forth with “solutions.”
3. Believers are to recognize when these things begin in the generation Jesus returns (Lk. 21:28, 32).
4. **You will hear of:** As many of these trends, and the news about them, accelerate at the same time, making global headline news, we are to understand that we are in a unique season in history. These signs make a greater impact as a prophetic sign as more people hear of them and are aware of them.

And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars...7For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes... (Mt. 24:6-8)

1. The very knowledge of these trends and events will shift the response of people individually and corporately and will affect their reactions, decisions, and even governmental policies.
2. The knowledge of all these negative trends will have an accumulated impact on society.
5. Jesus identified 10 trends as the beginning of birth pains (Mt. 24:4-8; Mk. 13:5-8, Lk. 21:8-11). Matthew mentioned seven trends and Luke added three more—“commotions” (21:9), “fearful sights” which includes great signs from heaven, and “perplexity at the roaring seas” (21:11, 25).

For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many. 6And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled...7For nation will rise against nation [ethnic conflict], and kingdom against kingdom [economic warfare]. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes...8All these are the beginning of sorrows. (Mt. 24:4-8)

But when you hear of wars and commotions...11And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences; and there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven... 25 And...earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring. (Lk 21:9-11, 25)

1. Deception and false christs: Many will come in Jesus’ name and will deceive many (v 5).
2. Wars: military and political conflict (Mt. 24:6; Mk. 13:7; Lk. 21:9)
3. Ethnic conflict: civil disorder and racism as nation (ethnos) rises against nation (Mt. 24:7)
4. Economic warfare: economic-related hostility, aggression, and conflict (Mt. 24:7)
5. Famines: massive food shortages (Mt. 24:7)
6. Pestilences (disease): The horrors of biological warfare will bring this to a new intensity.
7. Great earthquakes: great in destruction and loss of life (Lk. 21:11)

8. Commotions: chaotic events in society and creation (Lk. 21:9)
 9. Fearful sights as great signs from heaven: signs in the sky and related to the weather (Lk 21:11).
 10. Perplexity at the roaring of the sea (Lk 21:25)
6. **Premise:** Most of the positive and negative trends that will come in fullness at the time of Jesus' return are occurring now and will continue to increase until He comes.
 7. We resist the negative sign trends by praying against them and for mercy to those affected by them.
 8. **Paul warned of Godlessness in the Last Days**
But know this: Difficult times will come in the last days. 2 For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 unloving, irreconcilable, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, without love for what is good, 4 traitors, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, 5 holding to the form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid these people! (2 Tim 3:1-4)
 9. Paul exhorts Timothy and gives this young pastor some wise counsel on how to live in the midst of increasing godlessness in the last days.
 1. **Follow my example:** *But you have followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, and endurance, 11 along with the persecutions and sufferings... What persecutions I endured! (vv. 10-11)*
 2. **Expect persecution:** *In fact, all those who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (v. 12)*
 3. **Study the Scripture to equip yourself:** *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable... 17 that the man of God[b] may be complete, equipped for every good work. (vv. 15-17)*
 4. **Preach the Word:** *...preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. (2 Tim 4:2)*

III. Develop an Eternal Perspective

1. **All the apostles of Christ, except John, died a martyrs death.** The historic accounts of their deaths recount how they faced death for Jesus' sake with joy and without fear. What gave them such confidence to lay down their lives such peace and joy?
2. **They had a confidence in God's sovereignty and providence.** The providence of God is his purposeful sovereignty where He guides all things toward his ultimate goal.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us... And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Rom 8:18, 28)

3. They believed trials and suffering were God's means of producing Christlikeness.

We glory [rejoice] in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance [deep resolve to pursue and obey God] 4and perseverance, character [godliness]... (Rom. 5:3-4)

4. They were confidently secure in the love of God.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?...37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us...[nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:35, 37,39)

5. They were looking for and longing for the return of Jesus.

...looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of [j]our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus... (Titus 2:13)

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; 8 in the future there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing. (2 Tim 4:7)

“Behold, I am coming quickly, ...17 The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.”...“Yes, I am coming quickly.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. (Rev 22:12, 17, 20)

6. They considered the expectation of the Lord's coming as a motivation to holiness.

Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, 12 looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, (2 Pet 3:11-12)

6 Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. 3 And everyone who has this hope set on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. (1 John 3:2-3)

7. They looked at death as an passage way to the presence of Christ in the present heaven.

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. (Phil 1:21)

Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: ...8 We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord. (2 Cor 5:6, 8)

But he [Stephen], being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, 56 And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. (Acts 7:55-56)

8. They looked forward with great expectation eternal life on the new heaven and new earth.

But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. (2 Peter 3:13) Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

IV. Conclusion God, in His sovereignty, has chosen us to live in the place we live and at this time in history.

And He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their lands and territories. (Acts 17:26)

We are living at the end of the age before the second coming of our Lord and Savior. These are difficult days and will increase in intensity as they lead up to a time of the greatest pressure and testing ever known to mankind (Matt 24:21). We must embrace the apostolic perspective of suffering and persecution and live lives of whole-hearted love for our Savior.

Jesus will come to execute righteous judgment on the wicked and those who did not obey the gospel (2 Thes 1). In our suffering we must entrust our souls to Him and set our hope completely on the grace that will be revealed at His coming (1 Pet 4:19; 1:13).

Yet, these will be the greatest days since the first century church experienced the powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. There is a last days outpouring of the Spirit of God that will bring in a billion souls in the end-time harvest. Through the persecutions and sufferings the church will be purified, matured and become the glorious bride of Messiah. Her sacrificial love and service will provoke the Jews to jealousy and lead to the fulfillment of the promised day when "all Israel will be saved" (Rom 11:26).

Read the Scripture, pray, and cultivate a love and longing for His coming. Consider the coming resurrection and glorification of your body. Read the passages that describe the present heaven and the new heaven and earth. Meditate on these things and pray into them until they are deep seated reality to you.

Maranatha, that is, Lord, come!