

Preparation for Religious Persecution

In the second century, the persecution of Christians was a common practice throughout the whole of the Roman Empire. At this time, Christians were not necessarily sought out or hunted down, but if it became known that you were a Christian, or you were accused of being a Christian, you would be called before the proconsul, be made to renounce the LORD Jesus Christ, and to bow down and worship the Roman Emperor. One of the reasons why Christians were so hated during this time was because they would not partake in Emperor worship, nor would they worship any of the other gods of the empire. So, anytime there was a drought, or a bad crop, or a natural disaster, or anything bad, it was often the Christians who were to blame. Christians were actually referred to as atheists, because they rejected the multiple gods of Rome, and were committed to the one true God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Many believers were persecuted and martyred for their faith during this time.

One such martyr was the Bishop of Smyrna, Bishop Polycarp. In A.D. 155, Polycarp was arrested and charged with atheism. Given his advanced age, the proconsul urged him to renounce the Lord Jesus Christ and to worship the Emperor. The judge ordered Polycarp to deny the Lord Jesus Christ and to declare, "Out with the atheists!" To this order, Polycarp responded by pointing at the jeering crowds surrounding him, and crying out, "Yes, out with the atheists!" The judge urged him again to renounce the Lord Jesus Christ, and he assured him that if he would just swear by the Emperor and curse the Lord Jesus Christ, he would be released, and he would be free to go. But Polycarp replied, "For eighty-six years I have served him, and he has done me no evil. How could I curse my king, who saved me?" The judge then threatened to expose him to wild beasts, to be attacked, and to be eaten alive, to which Polycarp replied, "It is well for me to be speedily released from this life of misery." This reply angered the proconsul, and the judge ordered Polycarp to be burned alive at the stake. Polycarp replied, that "the fires that the judge could light would only last a moment, whereas the eternal fire would never go out." So they placed Polycarp atop of a great pile of wood and tied him to the stake. As the fires burned, his last recorded words were, "Lord Sovereign God, I thank you that you have deemed me worthy of this moment, so that, jointly with your martyrs, I may have a share in the cup of Christ. For this I bless and glorify you. Amen."

In the midst of great hostility, persecution, and suffering, when his life was at stake, Bishop Polycarp exemplified true Christianity. Polycarp was well prepared to die for his faith, his soul was ready to meet his Lord and Savior. Polycarp proved to be a steadfast and faithful witness of the Lord Jesus Christ to the very end –to his last dying breath.

As Christians, who live in the United States, we have lived relatively free from persecution of this severity and magnitude, but things may be changing. There seems to be a growing hostility and intolerance towards the truth of the LORD Jesus Christ, and to those who proclaim this truth. The truth of the Scripture stands in stark opposition to the theories and philosophies of our day. The exclusivity of Christ, stands in stark opposition to the inclusivity of the world. Today, it does not matter what you believe, so long as your beliefs do not infringe upon the beliefs of others. Today, truth exists only in the eye of the beholder. The culture in which we live seems to have reached the tipping point. Good is now considered evil, and evil is considered good. Rational thought has been replaced with irrational

thought, and logical thought has been replaced for illogical thought. Indeed, the truth of God has been exchanged for a lie. The order of creation has been reversed. The creature is now exalted, worshiped, and served rather than the Creator.

As morality continue to decline in our society, are you prepared to suffer for the LORD Jesus Christ? As your religious freedoms begin to erode, are you prepared to stand fast for the LORD Jesus Christ? As your liberties are suspended and revoked, are you prepared to suffer loss for the sake of the LORD Jesus Christ? If your faith in the LORD Jesus Christ cost you your job, would you remain steadfast? If your faith in the LORD Jesus Christ cost you your family, would you remain steadfast? If your faith in the LORD Jesus Christ cost you your standard of living, your comfort, and your freedom, would you remain steadfast? In the midst of hostility and persecution will you stand firm, proclaiming the truth of God, or will you collapse and compromise the truth?

I think most Christians would reply in the affirmative. “Yes, I will stand firm in the truth. Yes, I will give my life for the Gospel. Yes, I would rather die than to compromise and turn away from the Lord Jesus Christ.” Is it not interesting that while most of us would verbally assent to making the ultimate sacrifice for our faith, in reality we are often unwilling to make lesser sacrifices in far easier circumstances.

For example, what do you do when, someone says to you, “You don’t really believe in Creation do you?” What do you do when a professor, or a teacher, proclaims to the entire classroom, that all religions lead to the same God, and that there is no objective truth? What do you do when a co-worker says to you, in room full of people, “I am a women trapped in a man’s body?”

Will you stand firm? Will you remain steadfast? Will you give faithful testimony to the truth of the Scriptures and the Lord Jesus Christ, or will you recoil in silence, for fear of their opposition, for fear of their criticism, or for fear of persecution?

I know in my own life, in situations very similar to these, there have been times that I have chosen to be silent rather than choosing to be a steadfast witness for Christ. Even though, I would have firmly attested that I would be willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for Christ, I have often been unwilling to make lesser ones. I didn’t want to jeopardize my social standing. I didn’t want to jeopardize my comfort. I didn’t want things to get weird. I didn’t want things to get awkward. Looking back on my life, for many years I was unprepared to suffer as a disciple of the LORD Jesus Christ.

In 1 Peter 3:13-17, Peter prepares his readers for hostility, persecution, and suffering. In this passage, Peter provides five principles that will help prepare you to stand firm as a steadfast and faithful witnesses of the LORD Jesus Christ, even in the face of the most hostile and severe opposition.

1 Peter 3:13-17, Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? 14 But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, 15 but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, 16 having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. 17 For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

To be well prepared to suffer you must:

Have the right perspective (vv13-14a)

Have the right attitude (v14b)

Have the right heart (v15a)

Have the right answer (v15b)

Have the right conscience (vv16-17)

Principle #1, You must have the right perspective.

Peter begins this passage by asking a rhetorical question, 1 Peter 3:13, Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? Now before we answer this question, it is important to remember the context on this passage. 1 Peter 3:13 is the conclusion of what has been drawn from the preceding passage.

1 Peter 3:12, For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil. 13 Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?

In other words, if the LORD God is on the side of the righteousness, and if LORD God is against those who do evil, then what harm can possibly come to those who do good? Who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? The implied answer is no one. No one will be able to harm you if you are zealous for what it good.

How can this answer be true? How does this answer correspond with what we already know to be true in the Scriptures, that Christians will suffer, Christians will face difficulty, Christians will experience unjust persecution, physical harm, and even death? Throughout the history of the church, many Christians have died for their faith, and many more Christians will die for their faith. The Lord Jesus Christ himself told his disciples that they should expect suffering and persecution.

John 15:18, If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

In Paul's letter to the Philippian church he writes, Philippians 1:29, For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake. Again, in his last letter to Timothy, Paul reminds him, 2 Timothy 3:12, Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. The Scriptures are crystal clear, believers will suffer, believers will be persecuted.

What is Peter's purpose in asking this question in 1 Peter 3:13? Why does Peter ask, "Who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?" Peter's purpose in asking this question is meant to redirect our attention, and to give us the proper perspective on difficulty, persecution, and suffering. Peter is not suggesting that those who live good lives will live free from persecution and from physical harm. Rather, Peter is giving assurance that in the midst of physical harm, in the midst of hostility, in the midst of suffering, you will be safe, you will be secure, you will be protected, under the providential care and blessing of the LORD God. Throughout trials and throughout tribulation, Christians are safe and secure under the watchful eye and listening ear of our Father God.

This is the same truth that is seen all throughout the Scriptures. The LORD God is faithful, and we are to entrust our circumstances, our lives, our all, into his capable hands, into the capable hands of our faithful, good, and omnipotent Creator, our Father God. Nowhere is this truth more clearly seen and proclaimed than in the book of Romans. Turn with me for a moment to the book of Romans 8, this is a wonderful passage to memorize, to meditate upon, or at the very least underline in your Bible.

Romans 8:31-39, What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? 33 Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36 As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Beloved, there is nothing that can harm us, or separate us, from the love of God, not tribulation, not distress, not persecution, not famine, not nakedness, not danger, nor the sword. Those who belong to the LORD Jesus Christ are eternally secure and eternally protected. This same truth is seen in the book of Psalms.

Psalm 91, He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. 2 I will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.” 3 For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence. 4 He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. 5 You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, 6 nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday. 7 A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. 8 You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked. 9 Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place— the Most High, who is my refuge— 10 no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent. 11 For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. 12 On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone. 13 You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot. 14 “Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name. 15 When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. 16 With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.”

Who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? The answer is no one.

Peter then seeks to clarify this question in the following verse (v14). 1 Peter 3:14, But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. The Greek conjunction translated “but” could also be translated as “indeed” or “what is more.” The idea being, suffering is to be expected, difficulty will most assuredly come, but it should be for righteousness' sake.

What does it mean to suffer for righteousness' sake? It means that your suffering is based upon your righteousness, rather than your unrighteousness. It means that your suffering is based upon your good works, rather than you're bad. Suffering for the sake of righteousness has been one of Peter's recurring themes all throughout this letter. Remember back in 2:20, "For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God."

What credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? The implied answer, "There is no credit. There is no value. There is no benefit." If you sin and suffer harsh treatment as a result of your sin, then you are receiving justice, you are receiving what is owed, you are receiving exactly what is deserved. There is no virtue in suffering for our own sinful deeds. There is no glory in suffering for our own sinful deeds.

However, if when you do good, and suffer for it, and you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. Suffering patiently for righteousness sake, suffering patiently for well-doing, is what pleases and glorifies the LORD God.

To those who do not know the Lord Jesus Christ, enduring unjust suffering, is completely unnatural, it is completely counter intuitive, it is contrary to every one of man's natural impulses and desires, because their eyes are fixed upon the things of this world, their eyes are fixed upon the temporal.

But for those who do know the Lord Jesus Christ, our eyes should be fixed upon the eternal, where Christ, seated at the right hand of God. Our eyes should be fixed upon our kingdom, our kingdom that is not of this world. Our eyes should be fixed upon our inheritance, which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept and guarded in heaven by the power of God. In suffering and persecution our eyes must be fixed upon our loving and compassionate Father God, who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-sovereign.

1 Peter 4:14-16, If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. 15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. 16 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.

The right perspective is to view suffering, for the sake of righteousness, as an opportunity to receive spiritual blessing. This must be our perspective.

1 Peter 3:14, But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed.

How exactly are we blessed? What does Peter mean by these words, "you will be blessed?" Thomas Watson, the great Puritan answers this question by saying that, "Afflictions work for good, as they make way for glory. Not that they merit glory, but they prepare for it. As plowing prepares the earth for a crop, so affliction prepare us for glory. The painter lays his gold upon dark colors, so God first lays the dark colors of affliction, and then he lays the golden color of glory. The vessel is first seasoned before wine is poured into it; the vessels of mercy are first seasoned with affliction, and then the wine of glory is poured in. Thus we see afflictions are not prejudicial, but beneficial to the saints."

Righteous suffering is of great benefit to the believer. Righteous suffering prepares us for glory. Righteous suffering is the pathway to glory. To those who suffer, an eternal reward is waiting, the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:10-12, Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

But not only does righteous suffering prepare us for glory, it also gives us great benefits in this life as well. In fact, in the midst of trials and tribulation, the Scriptures tell us to be joyful.

James 1:2-4, Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

What I've always found interesting about this passage is the implication. As a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, your life will not be complete, your life will not be whole, unless you meet trials of various kinds. This is another benefit from suffering. Trials of various kinds tests your faith. The testing of your faith produces steadfastness, and the full effect of steadfastness is spiritual maturity, it is spiritual completeness, not lacking in anything of spiritual importance and value. But without trials of various kinds, your faith would not be tested. And without the testing of your faith, you would not be steadfast. And without steadfastness, you would be spiritually immature, spiritually incomplete, lacking in everything of spiritual importance and value.

1 Peter 5:10, And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself, restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

Righteous suffering benefits the believer by preparing us for glory, by giving us endurance, by completing us, by restoring, confirming, strengthening and establishing us –all of these things come from trials, tribulation, and from suffering.

The first principle to help prepare us for suffering is to have the right perspective. Beloved, expect trials, expect accusations, expect persecution, expect hostility, expect to be misunderstood, expect suffering, but also expect to be rewarded, expect the blessing of God upon you. It may not seem like it, when you are in the fires of affliction, but you are blessed when you suffer for righteousness' sake –you are tremendously blessed. Through suffering you grow in your understanding of the character of God, you grow in your understanding of yourself, you grow in your understanding of our great salvation, and all of these things prepares you for glory. Suffering prepares you for the kingdom of heaven, so rejoice and be glad. Paul proclaimed, in Romans 8:18, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” Earthly suffering is not even worth comparing to the blessing that is waiting for us. If we truly consider the greatness and the glory that is to be revealed to us, it should not be difficult for us to bear the burden and concerns of this world. Always remember, the cross must precede the crown. It did for Jesus and it will for you. To be well prepared for suffering you must have the right perspective.

Principle #2, Have the right attitude (14a).

1 Peter 3:14a, Have no fear of them, nor be troubled,

The Greek word translated fear is “*phobeo*,” and it means to put to flight or to terrify. In this context, it describes a painful emotion or passion that is excited by an expectation of evil, or the apprehension of impending danger. The construction of this phrase in the Greek is in the aorist tense so it comes across much like a command. In other words, you must not yield to any kind of fear, you must not give in to any kind of fear, you must not be fearful. Christians are not to allow fear, a feeling of fright, or terror, to grip them, regardless of their circumstances.

Peter once again goes to an Old Testament passage, Isaiah 8, to help illustrate this point. The historical context of this passage is very helpful in fully understanding Peter's meaning.

Isaiah 8:11-13, For the LORD spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying: 12 “Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. 13 But the LORD of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.

The context surrounding this passage, the southern kingdom of Judah, whose King was Ahaz, was facing a serious crisis because of a looming invasion by the Assyrian Army. The northern kingdom of Israel, as well as the kingdom of Syria wanted to form an alliance with King Ahaz, to join forces and to drive back the Assyrian Army. King Ahaz refused this alliance and in retaliation, the northern kingdom of Israel and the Syrians threatened to invade him. So King Ahaz, in an attempt to preserve his reign, allies himself with the Assyrians to fend off the northern invasion from Israel and Syria. The Prophet Isaiah and the faithful remnant of the kingdom of Judah were caught in the cross-hairs. They were being charged with conspiracy because they opposed this godless alliance, and in this passage (Isaiah 8) the LORD God was encouraging them not to fear the Assyrians, nor those in Judah who were charging them with conspiracy, but rather, they were to fear the Lord of hosts and regard Him as holy. Peter uses this example, and tells his readers to fear the LORD God, above anyone else, or anything else, that threatens to harm them. Jesus Christ is Lord. Jesus Christ is Lord over all things. Jesus Christ is King, he is sovereign over all. He is all-powerful, all-knowing, and ever present. He is good. He is faithful. Regardless of what troubles and difficulties come your way, the LORD God can be trusted.

1 Peter 3:14a, Have no fear of them, nor be troubled,

The term troubled, in the Greek, refers to something that is shaken up, stirred up, disturbed, or unsettled. It means to throw something into a state of disorder or chaos. Most of the New Testament uses of this word are figurative, and describes the state of one's mind as being stirred up, agitated, or experiencing inward commotion. Since we are blessed by God, when we suffer, we should not fear what unbelievers will do to us. In the midst of difficulty we should not be stirred up, or agitated, or troubled. In other words, we are not to be affected by any fear, we are not to be affected by the fear which seeks to subdue and control us. Peter's command is simple and straightforward. Do not fear them. Do not be troubled.

The command to not to fear is a tricky one is it not? How do you stop fearing when you are fearful? How do you put an end to fearful thoughts? How do you eradicate fear from your life? The answer is quite simple: To eradicate fear from your life, you must turn to the LORD Jesus Christ. In the

midst of fearful thoughts, and fearful circumstances, turn to the One who is bigger than all of your fears –the LORD God. If you truly fear the LORD God, then you will fear nothing else. The LORD God incarnate is the end of fear. To live daily in his presence, to live daily in the presence of King Jesus, will eradicate all fear from your life.

Psalm 23:4, Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Psalm 34:4, I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.

Psalm 56:3-4, When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. 4 In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?

Fear can be either good, or it can be bad. Good fear, the fear of the LORD, results in humility, thankfulness, and trust in the LORD God. The fear of the LORD results in protection –God is our refuge, our strength, our deliverer, our shield, our dwelling place, our high tower. The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all. Bad fear, the fear of man, the fear of circumstances, the fear of persecution, will constrict you, it will rob you of your strength and your resolve. Fear can easily become your god. Fear can easily become the center of your life, and your thoughts. Fear can easily control your emotions, your activities, where you go, what you do, with whom you socialize. Fear can easily control your worship, your service to others, your use of money, and your health. Bad fear is a snare, it is a trap, and many a good man have been ambushed by it.

Proverbs 29:25, The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.

Trust the LORD God and you will be safe. Pursue the LORD God and you will be safe. Make the LORD God your first and most important priority, and then take your fears to him. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. The LORD God wants you to seek him, and to please him, first. Do not put your fears before the LORD God. Do not give priority to your fears. God is to be your priority. The only way to overcome and eradicate fear in your life is to turn to the LORD Jesus Christ, who will give you rest from all your fears.

To be well prepared to suffer:

Principle #1, you must have the right perspective, expect trials, expect accusations, expect persecution, expect suffering, but also, expect rewards, and expect blessing.

Principle #2, you must have the right attitude, have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but rather cast out fear by turning to the LORD Jesus Christ and loving him supremely (with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength). Give the LORD God priority, for he is before all things.

To be well prepared to suffer, you will also need Principles #3-5, the right heart, the right answer, and the right conscience, which we will cover next time.