

PREPARED FOR PERSECUTION? (1 and 2)

Joel James

Grace Fellowship, Pretoria

Persecution is normal.

Jesus said, *If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you* (John 15:20, NAS), and Paul added, *All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted* (2 Tim 3:12, NAS). If persecution is normal, then as Christians in South Africa, we have experienced very little *normal*. But as the song says, *Times, they are a-changing*.ⁱ The fact is, we are living smack-dab in the middle of a transition from cultural favour to potential cultural fury. Are we ready?

Today there are *two flash points* that seem sure to lead to an explosion of cultural and governmental oppression of Christians in South Africa and other Western countries. The first is *exclusivity*. Because it's what Jesus taught, we believe that Christianity is exclusively true (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). We refuse to acquiesce to the postmodern notion that all religions and self-created versions of spirituality are valid. Christ says that He is the only way to the Father, and that settles the matter. And naturally, the *exclusivity* of biblical Christianity incites the rage and resentment of a pluralistic culture.

The *second flash point* appears to be *homosexuality*. Today, taking a firm stand against homosexuality as a God-condemned (and God-forgivable) sin sets off a forest fire of cultural rage. This issue is already leading to the "legal" persecution of Christians. For example, I was speaking with a friend in the United States recently whose church is hoping to build their first church building. However, it is uncertain whether the city council will give them a building permit because their city is considering refusing permits to any organisation that will not allow "transgender" men to use the women's toilets on their property.

And, of course, the refusal of building permits is just the first drop of rain from a looming thunderstorm. More intensive restrictions, fines, punishments, and even jail sentences are sure to follow.

As Christians, should we fear this transition from cultural smile to culture frown? Actually, throughout history Christ has often shepherded His people through the transition you and I are facing. In fact, Jesus Himself experienced it. For example, Luke 4 says that the people of Nazareth's initial response to Jesus' preaching in His home synagogue was warm, favourable, and friendly: *All were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips* (4:22, NAS).

However, just minutes later, when Jesus mentioned the unpopular doctrine of Gentile salvation, the synagogue erupted in fury. Their response instantly morphed from benign to deadly, and Jesus' childhood friends and neighbours tried (unsuccessfully) to throw Him off a cliff (Luke 4:28-29). As John Calvin said, "The Gospel cannot be proclaimed without the world straightway going mad. Hence, it will never be possible for godly teachers to avoid the world's hatred."ⁱⁱⁱ

At times unbelievers will temporarily smile on the high morality and noble truths of biblical Christianity. However, the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light cannot peacefully coexist for long. When you point out the world's sin or the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of their belief systems, you can't expect them to applaud, slap you on the back, and raise a rousing chorus of "For he's a jolly good fellow."

Not surprisingly, the apostles experienced the same transition from general cultural acceptance to opposition that Jesus did. In Acts 2:47, Luke records that the early church initially enjoyed "favor with all the people" (NAS). However, that season of cultural charity came to a crashing halt (Acts 4-5).

First the Sanhedrin (their version of Parliament) threatened the apostles and issued a restraining order against their preaching. When the apostles refused to stop heralding their inflammatory message, Judea's legislative leaders threw the Twelve in jail (5:17-18). Arrested yet a third time, Peter and the others stood their ground, *We must obey God rather than men* (5:29, NAS), and boldly used the super-charged atmosphere of an antagonistic parliamentary hearing to evangelise their persecutors (5:30-31). The result was

a brutal whipping. In other words, the apostles knew all about the transition from warm-hearted cultural tolerance to hot persecution.

The apostle Paul repeatedly experienced the same transition. In Pisidian Antioch, in the course of one week, Paul went from having the synagogue congregation beg him for another sermon to being driven out of town (13:42, 50). In Acts 14, in Lystra, Paul was first worshiped as a god and then stoned and left for dead—that's a transition!

Here's the key: in no case did the persecution they experienced discourage the believers, cripple the church, or stop the progress of the gospel: *And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ (5:42, NAS); The disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit (13:52, NAS).*

As Bible-believing Christians look to the future, apprehension is understandable, but unnecessary. Be assured of this: Christ has called us to serve Him in South Africa in this hour, and there is copious proof that our Lord knows how to shepherd His people through a transition from a time of cultural tolerance to an era of angry oppression and persecution.

Do you feel the need for grace in order to stand firm? Good. Human desperation and divine deliverance is the normal rhythm of the Christian life. And when it comes to courage to face persecution—God gives *that* ticket when it's time to get on the train. As believers, we are branches that have a living, vital, invisible-but-real connection with Jesus Christ, the Vine (John 15:4-5). He will sustain us no matter how fierce the heat and drought of persecution.

Prepared for Persecution? (2)

Western Christians most often think of persecution as being sponsored by atheistic governments or by antagonistic adherents of a false religion. However, Jesus also warned His disciples about persecution from a different, unexpected source: from the professing adherents of true, *biblical* religion. For example, in John 16:2 Jesus told His disciples that the longest thorn in their sides as they went out to preach the gospel would be their fellow

unsaved Jews: They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God (NAS). Today, South African Christians are experiencing something similar: not persecution by unsaved Jews, but persecution by *unsaved Christians*.

Faithful Christians always experience hostility, not just from the world, but also from professing Christians who desire a broader, more liberal, more embracing, less stringent, less doctrinal, *unbiblical* Christianity. To illustrate this, let me ask you a question: As a believer living in South Africa, does the mocking or animosity that you occasionally experience for loving God, the Bible, the church, and God's morality usually come from people of other religions or from so-called Christians? In fact, ninety-eight times out of a hundred, the opposition you face comes from friends and family *who profess to know Christ*.

There is no fury like the fury of a professing Christian whose lack of love for Christ and lack of commitment to God's Word is exposed by the devotion and faithfulness of a true believer.

In fact, Jesus warned that many of the most menacing persecutors of true believers in the days before His return will be apostate "Christians" who, after having abandoned Christ, will wheel their cannons around and unleash a barrage of hate on their former comrades: *Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name. At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another (Matt 24:9-10, NAS).*

Surveying the landscape of evangelical Christianity in our country, it's easy to see just how this could happen. A vast percentage of the professing Christians in South Africa define Christianity with three words: *health, wealth, and prosperity*. When imprisonment threatens their health and legislative penalties threaten their wealth, it's not hard to predict that the counterfeit believers in the prosperity movement will quickly abandon the Christ they never truly loved in order to seek their personal prosperity elsewhere.

What about the professing believer who defines his Christianity in terms of the self-love of pop psychology? What will he do when the person he loves most—himself—comes under threat? Will he stand for Christ? Or how about the masses who saunter through the doors of the seeker-sensitive mega-churches each Sunday? If you go to church because it's convenient, because you enjoy the humour, the skits, the music, and the stage show, and because you like the fact that they don't ask you sing anything, sign anything, give anything, forsake anything, or believe anything, are you going to stand firm when persecution comes?

How about liberal theologians whose ministry seems to consist entirely of ridiculing and discrediting the Bible? It's entertaining to play higher-critical games with God's Word as long it's safe to do so, but what will the critics do when owning a Bible might send them to jail?

The Emergents? Ambiguity and agnosticism might seem intellectually noble in days of peace, but playful questioning, "sincere" doubting, and a contempt for certainty are shaky grounds on which to withstand persecution. Traditional, cultural Christians? Will those in our society who attend church primarily out of ritual and habit seek the fellowship of the faithful when going to church could cost them their jobs or lead to their children being denied the opportunity to attend university?

When the first wave of real persecution sweeps the church in South Africa, all the prosperity, self-love, entertainment-enthralled, liberal, agnostic, Emergent, and traditional Christians are going to head for the exits *en masse*. What's more, they're going to be furious that *you* won't go with them. They're going to be enraged that you won't join them in abandoning biblical Christianity, as they frantically "reimagine" their faith in order to secure the approval of the world.

If you're like the people in my church, you are already experiencing censure and derision at the hands of *unsaved Christians*, primarily in the form of scorn or displeasure expressed by professing Christians among your family, friends, or co-workers. Don't be surprised. Unsaved Christians will always do their best (and their worst) to discredit, marginalise, and

even abuse those who have the audacity to believe that the Bible is true and authoritative, and that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to be saved.

How can you persevere in the face of that kind of discouraging resistance? One way is to remember that the early church's most bitter and violent enemy was Saul of Tarsus. He embodied John 16:2, believing he was serving God by expelling Christians from the synagogue and by lobbying for their imprisonment or execution. But when Christ intervened on the road to Damascus, Saul became the apostle Paul—the church's greatest church-planting missionary and theologian. In other words, if you're faithful, God might save your persecutor and turn him or her into a loyal and effective tool in His hand. Wouldn't that be great? Be faithful, pray, and see what God does.

ⁱ Bob Dylan, Copyright © 1963, 1964 by Warner Bros. Inc.; renewed 1991, 1992 by Special Rider Music.

ⁱⁱ John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John 11-21 and the First Epistle of John*, in Calvin's New Testament Commentaries, 104.