

Perspective

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The Persecution of the Saints Through the Ages

There is a long history of persecution of those who choose to lead a righteous way of life. Since Adam sinned in the garden of Eden, those persecutions have been recorded in the Bible. Cain killed his own brother. Why? His works were evil and Abel's works were righteous (I John 3:12; Hebrews 11:4). Abel suffered death for righteously obeying God. However, in society a fundamental reason one person or group persecutes another is because they think they are more righteous. One religious group can violently persecute another while both are woefully wrong theologically. Many stories of the Bible give us the history of the persecution of the patriarchs, matriarchs, prophets, and apostles and true believers in God's ways. However, persecutions aren't just reserved for a choice few, and it will come our way, if we live righteously. The apostle Paul warns all of God's people in II Timothy 3:12, *"Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution."*

The saints are persecuted and delivered, but not all

In Genesis 5:24, we read God took Enoch, but why? The verse states that he was not found. *E.W. Bullinger Commentary* states, by coupling this verse with Hebrews 11:5, that Enoch was, "Translated without dying." Enoch had to be miraculously physically translated by God to another area to protect him from those who wanted to kill him; he was a preacher of righteousness (Hebrews 11:5). God snatched Enoch and moved him to a safe place on earth so he could not be found and he would not die.

God instructed Noah to build the Ark. No doubt he faced constant cynicism and ridicule for decades from the people of his time. Despite it, Noah's faith and obedience to God are a testimony to his righteousness and symbolizes God's deliverance for all humankind. Satan and his demons stirred people to persecute Noah to delay or even stop his building of the Ark. I Peter 3:19-20 indicates the spirit world tried to thwart what God commanded Noah to do: Jesus Christ, *"...preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water."*

In the book of Daniel there are two well-known examples of persecution for righteousness' sake. The story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who were commanded by a decree of Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar to bow down before a great image of gold he had made, or face death in a fiery furnace (Daniel 3:1-7, 15-18). They refused to obey the king's order, saying they would not worship his idol and they would look to God to deliver them out of his hands: *"But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up."* (Daniel 3:18). In the account they were tied up and tossed into the burning inferno like cordwood. God miraculously caused them to be impervious to the heat of the flames of the furnace. Daniel 3:27 states, *"And the satraps, administrators, governors, and the king's counselors gathered together, and they saw these men on whose bodies the fire had no power; the hair of their head was not singed nor were their garments affected, and the smell of fire was not on them."*

Their resolve to obey God, rather than the king, was such a witness to Nebuchadnezzar that he praised their God, and he decreed in verse 29, *"Therefore I make a decree that any people, nation, or language which speaks anything amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made an ash heap; because there is no other God who can deliver like this."*

The prophet Daniel was a wise righteous man of high integrity. His enemies were jealous of his exalted office as one of three presidents in the Medo-Persian Empire, over them, in his service to King Darius (Daniel 6:2-3). Daniel's enemies deceptively convinced the king to make a decree that no man could make a petition to any man or God for thirty days except the king, or he would be cast in to lion's den. Of course, they knew already that Daniel was dedicated to prayer three times a day. However, the prophet did not change his practice of prayer: *"Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days."* (Daniel 6:10)

King Darius was a close friend of Daniel; he had been tricked into his decision by these evil men. But according to the law of the Medes, he had to carry through with punishment and cast Daniel into the lion's den.

The king comforted him and said, “...to Daniel, *‘Your God, whom you serve continually, He will deliver you.’*” (Daniel 6:16). The king left and spent the night fasting for his friend; he came early in the morning to find Daniel safe and sound. God sent an angel to shut the mouths of the hungry lions all through the night (Daniel 6:22).

Daniel’s enemies were not so fortunate: “...those men who had accused Daniel, and they cast them into the den of lions—they, their children, and their wives; and the lions overpowered them, and broke all their bones in pieces before they ever came to the bottom of the den. Then King Darius wrote: *To all peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you. I make a decree that in every dominion of my kingdom men must tremble and fear before the God of Daniel...*” (Daniel 6:24-26)

Not all of God’s servants were delivered from death, but suffered as faithful witnesses to others. We read about the lives of the “who’s who of saints” in Hebrews 11:13: “*These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar of...*” Verses 35-38 says further, “*Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.*”

How might persecution begin in our time

The noted talk show host and head of Turning Point USA, Charlie Kirk, was speaking at a debate at Utah State University when he was assassinated by Tyler Robinson. Charlie Kirk’s staunch beliefs, which he boldly expressed about gender, family, and marriage, are likely the reason for Robinson’s outrage which caused him to carry through with his heinous crime.

Though Mr. Kirk was not a member of the church, most would agree with his beliefs regarding these topics. We have preached these things publicly over the airways for decades. If there are those who would take action to murder someone like him over these issues, how long before it happens to the church?

One thing we learned during the pandemic is how fast Americans and other western countries became so quickly subservient over quarantine rules. No only did individuals do it, but even the churches acquiesced and submitted to about any rule passed down by the CDC or medical agency in other countries. Neighbors were even reporting on neighbors, and some were thrown in jail or fined, if they did not comply.

How quickly the true people of God would stand out if another pandemic crisis were to happen. Or will it be something else which will come to test the conviction of faith we have to our great God? Will it be such a great test of our faith that to not comply with the state could mean a fine, jail time, or even God forbid, death.

We may suffer persecution beforehand, but the Bible says it is surely coming when the fifth seal is opened! Revelation 6:9-11 says, “*When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’ Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.*”

A turning point, a time to hold fast to win

The real turning point for Jesus was when Judas betrayed Him with a kiss, which identified Him for the officials who sought to arrest Him that the night of the Passover. By the afternoon of the 14th of Abib He was crucified on the stake. Judas was the son of perdition, one of the twelve who had been a part of a virtual family with Jesus. Jesus had taught them, “*‘a man’s enemies will be those of his own household.’*” (Matthew 10:36)

Jesus was hated because He was righteous. He taught His disciples, if they have hated me, they will hate you, and in John 15:20, He told them, “*Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also.*”

The apostle Paul wrote in Romans 8:18, “*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.*”

Remember what our Lord said in the beatitudes: “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” (Matthew 5:10)

They will be the ones who hold fast and win the crown of life forevermore!