

Enduring Persecution in the Christian Life

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- Psalter 336:1,2
- 2 Corinthians 4
- Psalter 122:3,4,5
- Psalter 152:1,2,3,5
- Psalter 331:1,4

Dear congregation, today many Christians are being persecuted for the sake of the gospel. I especially think of Christians in those countries where even meeting together, as we do, is at the risk of their lives, and of being tortured. In other places, ministers of the gospel are imprisoned and silenced from the pulpit. And even in North America, we are now seeing a growing separation between those who will live godly and those who will not. History shows that when the church is especially faithful to the Word of God, she gives a sharper witness to the world of that impending destruction that is coming when this world shall be devoured with flames and evildoers shall be burned up. The more the church points out the gracious character of God and the deceitfulness of men, the more she is persecuted. This will increase as we see the last day approaching when the Son of Man shall come upon the clouds of heaven.

On this National Day of Prayer for the persecuted church, we could focus on those who are persecuted worldwide, including how we are to pray for them and what sort of situations they are finding themselves in. Yet, when we read or hear of them, they would not have us focus on them, but they would have us focus on Christ. Many times, I am afraid, the persecuted church is praying more for us than we are praying for them. They are praying for the people in the West who have been defiled through the riches of this world, who are not giving a consistent witness to the name of Jesus Christ. Is this you and me who they are praying for, and shall we not even remember those who are in bonds as being bound with them? Therefore, in light of this persecution worldwide, let us turn to 2 Timothy 3:11b-12, "What persecutions I endured; but out of them all the Lord delivered me. Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."

We hope to see:

Enduring Persecution in the Christian Life

1. Godly living
2. Guaranteed persecution
3. Glorious deliverance

The apostle Paul knew what it was to be persecuted and what it was to be abased, but he also knew what it was to have been a persecutor. By the grace of God, he became one who was persecuted. In 2 Corinthians 11, we read, "Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not? If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities."

What do you glory in, your name, or your infirmity for the sake of Christ? Even while Paul is writing this letter to his spiritual son Timothy, he is in prison for the name and sake of Christ. He writes, "Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner" (1:8). And Paul warns Timothy that there will come into the church false teachers having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof; they shall be ever learning, ever coming to knowledge, but never to the knowledge of the truth as it is in Christ Jesus. He tells Timothy, they shall be evil men, impostors who shall grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. Paul says to his son Timothy, "Timothy, look at me, look at my life, you have known and seen my doctrine, what manner of life I have lived, my purpose, my faith, my long-suffering, my charity, my patience." Then he says, "Timothy, you have seen the persecutions and afflictions I have endured." And he

adds, "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."

What is it to live godly in Christ Jesus? Why does Paul put this in connection with, "shall suffer persecution"? The Holy Spirit here, through the apostle Paul, does not want to give us the idea that simply to live godly, that is morally, in this world is sufficient. Many people are moving toward some morality in their life. You hear that when you speak with people on the plane. They tell me that they themselves have been worldly, dabbling with drugs, and practicing immorality, but now they have children at home and they want to try to teach their children the right way because they see that there is something attractive about morality after all, but they forget that Paul says, "godly in Christ Jesus." They separate living godly from Him who gave the commandments, the moral law. It is only when we are in Christ Jesus that we can live godly. To live godly and to be in Christ Jesus is, for Paul, one concept, one truth. To live godly presupposes that we are declared righteous by Christ, that we are born again, that we have been made one with Him by a lively, saving faith that trusts only in the righteousness of Christ Jesus.

In the world today, we are confronted with a large number of choices. There are many churches you could have gone to today. There are many different religions you could choose to belong to, and you will find the common opinion among many in this world is: "You can believe what you want to believe but I will believe what I want to believe. You must respect my opinion and I will respect your opinion, as long as you are not exclusive in your opinion. Don't tell me that mine is wrong and yours is right. We are all entitled to our own opinions. If I define adultery in different terms than what you do, that's my opinion and my choice." But here Paul is saying that living godly in Christ Jesus is the only way. He is referring back to what he said in verse 10, where he says, thou hast known my doctrine, my manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, charity, and patience. All who hear the gospel, but especially those who are saved by Christ, are called to live godly in Christ Jesus. It is thus not a private affair, where I simply have my own religion to myself, but we are to live godly in the midst of this world. We must give testimony to the One who has bought us. Christianity must be confessed; it must be lived.

What is your confession in the midst of this world? Can you say that you have lived your life so that others, looking at you day by day, would say to their friends,

“There is one that walks like Christ walked”? Do you walk in the midst of your family so that you are known, by word and deed, for calling sin sin, grace grace, and God God? Do you do this with humility and a recognition that when you see the sinful lifestyles of others, you say, "There but for the grace of God, go I?" Do you speak out against what is sinful and for grace? Do you bring God's Word to bear upon your families and your friends. No, we don't go about looking for trouble in the midst of this world, as if we are looking for persecution, but the fact is, if we don't have any persecution without and within, then there is a serious question of whether we are living godly in Christ Jesus.

Whom do you fear more, God or man? Who is predominant in your life? Who influences your decisions day by day? Who influences your actions? Little children, when you are in school and one of your friends or classmates asks you to do something that you know you shouldn't do, what is your first thought? Is it, “I wonder what they will think of me if I don't do this,” or do you think about what God thinks of this and therefore you can't do it? Who is bigger? Whom do you serve? God or man? It can be, of course, that God's people fall into the fear of men. Think of Elijah, standing on Mount Carmel, saying, “Choose you whom you will serve. If God be God, serve him. If Baal be God, serve him," while a few hours later, he runs from Jezebel.

When we speak of persecution, of those who are suffering in other lands for the name of Christ, we can sympathize with them. We may even consider dying for Christ if we were required to. But sometimes it is easier to say that we will die for Him than to live for Him. If I told you that you need not suffer death to serve Christ and to live godly, but you must spend your years in being unpopular, or poor, or mocked, is that something you would choose to do? There are many today who have discarded their faith in the face of persecution and have joined themselves with the world. Whom do you fear more, men or God? You know, it is relatively easy to travel to Mexico or a large city like Toronto or New York, and evangelize the people on the street, but if we haven't evangelized those in our own home, who are we fearing? Who do we live unto?

Are you living godly in Christ Jesus? None of us have consistently had the boldness and clarity with which Jesus testified to the gospel. None of us are able to

extract the fear of man from our hearts as we ought, and to open our mouths to speak to others as we ought, We must seek to be conformed to the image of Christ so that we would more and more live godly in Christ Jesus. We must do this even if it makes us unpopular and appear as fools in the sight of the world. Are you going to rise up in the midst of this generation on the last day and say I have witnessed to you, or shall the world testify against you, rising up in judgment against you?

Perhaps the days are coming when we will be worshiping in homes and in barns. Are you ready? Have you counted the cost? Are you ready to be counted among those who do not bow the knee to this world? Are you living godly in Christ Jesus? This does not consist simply of living a moral life and coming to church. All of these things are necessary indeed, but are you seeking to be more holy in Christ? Do you seek your holiness in Him and then seek to live a life of gratitude to Him for His glorious salvation? Is it the practice of your life to avoid every sin as it comes into your mind? Do you crucify sin at every cost, seeking the grace of God to put it to death within you?

You all have the calling to live Christianly. At your work, in your everyday living, is where you are called to exercise this calling. Are you seeking to be conformed more and more to Christ in every area of your life? Are you more and more dependent upon the intercession and mediatorial work of Christ alone? Do you need Him more and more every day and go to Him for forgiveness and cleansing and strength for each day and each hour?

Are you in Christ Jesus? That prompts a life of obedience. We read that Jesus Himself learned obedience by the things He suffered. God brings His people through trials and afflictions so that they too might learn obedience. By afflictions and trials and persecutions the child of God often grows the most. That's not an enjoyable way for the flesh, but it is a profitable way. It is impossible that we should be equal to Jesus in His sufferings and pains, but we are called to resemble Him.

Who is able to live godly in Christ Jesus as we are called to do? This life of obedience and this godly living seems more fit for angels and just men made perfect than for us who remain in the flesh and combat indwelling sin. To live

godly in Christ Jesus is only possible if we are dependent on the mediatorial work of Christ who is at the right hand of the Father making intercession for His church. His work is full and complete. He sits at the right hand of God. God sees the work of His Son and rests in it. The angels see the work of Christ and are amazed and wonder. We are also to rest satisfied in what He has done, and at the end of each day we must confess we fall short. We are unprofitable servants. What a wonder it is then, when we come to the throne of grace and mercy, that we find we are not cast away for all our defects. When we look to that One who sits at the right hand of His Father, we have bold access to the throne of God in confidence that we will be heard by the faith of Him who was delivered for our offences and raised again for our justification, who ever lives to make intercession for us.

Do you live godly in Christ Jesus? If so, then you will suffer persecution. That is our second thought, the guarantee of persecution. Paul says, "All those that live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." This is a constant theme of Scripture that we, in this 21st century of wealth and luxury, seem to forget. You can find this theme repeatedly in the epistles of Peter and Paul. Peter says in 1 Peter 4, "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you; on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or a busybody in other men's matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf." And Jesus said, "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you." He calls to you and me, "Take up your cross and follow Me."

Watson said, "Persecution is the legacy bequeathed from Christ to His people." Jesus said in John 15, "Remember the word that I said unto you, the servant is not

greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you."

Paul doesn't tell us how much persecution we will endure, whether we shall suffer unto death, or suffer inward trial and temptation. Indeed, the Lord can give His people a quiet and a calm life. Proverbs 16 says that when a man's ways please the Lord, He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him. And yet our text, as well as many scriptures, set forth the antithesis between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. So Paul is here not only referring to his own life, but to the lives of all believers. All who live godly must expect suffering.

What sufferings did Paul want to point out to Timothy? In Acts 13 and 14, we see what Paul endured and what he was most likely referring to when he says that persecutions and afflictions came to him at Antioch, Iconium, and at Lystra. At the beginning of Acts 13 he had preached for two Sabbaths at Antioch. The Jews had become angry with his preaching that Christ was the Messiah, but the Gentiles were glad. Then in chapter 13:49-52 we read, "The word of the Lord was published throughout all the region. But the Jews stirred up the devout and honourable women, and the chief men of the city, and raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them out of their coasts. But they shook off the dust of their feet against them, and came unto Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy, and with the Holy Ghost." So Paul and Barnabas speak the Word at Iconium, and again, you read in chapter 14, unbelieving Jews stirred up insurrection against them. You can see throughout the book of Acts that there is a clear refusal of the Jews to bow before Christ. Those who are religious often persecute the church the most. When they were about to be assaulted in chapter 14, they fled to Lystra and Derbe, where they preached the gospel and performed the miracle of healing the lame man, and then certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium persuaded the people to stone Paul. They dragged him out of the city and left him for dead and then verses 20-22 say, "Howbeit, as the disciples stood round about him, he rose up, and came into the city: and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe. And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium and Antioch, confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God." Paul in essence is telling Timothy,

“Don't forget that it is through much tribulation that we enter the kingdom of God.

Isn't it being engaged in warfare that makes a soldier a good soldier? Suffering is necessary for triumph; without this, how can you really show that you are living godly in Christ Jesus? Without this, are you showing that you fear God or fear man? I would not have those who can not yet name the name of Christ, to hold back from coming to Him because of the persecution that may ensue and come upon you, by naming His name. I can tell you that no matter what persecutions come, if you may by grace live godly in Christ Jesus, there is no greater joy and no greater satisfaction than to serve Him no matter what persecutions, trials, or afflictions come upon you. The pleasure of sin can never give what God offers in salvation in His Son. We must always realize that when we are born again, when we come to live, by the grace of God, godly in Christ Jesus, we are declaring war against sin and the world and they in turn declare war on us. Human nature is basically the same from the beginning of the world until this very day. Cain's anger toward his brother Abel still exists today. How often doesn't it happen that two unbelievers are married and when one of them comes to faith in Christ, then the other persecutes the new convert. Perhaps a young person is converted and there are others who mock and ridicule him. Perhaps at one time he was praised for being the life of the party, now he is despised. God's people are called to endure slander and ridicule not only from the world, but sad to say, must often endure it even within the church. Brothers and sisters calling upon the same God revile one another. Let it not be once so named among you. Christ says that men shall say all manner of evil against you, but He says they shall do it falsely. So if any one speaks evil of you or me, it ought to be because they do it falsely. There ought to be no ground for anyone to say anything against us. We ought to give no reason for them to speak ill concerning us. We must give a good testimony of the Christianity we are called to live.

When we follow Jesus Himself from the manger, because there was no place for Him in the inn, all the way to the cross, was there any persecution like His? He was reviled, He was slandered, He was mocked, He was rebuked, He was bruised, He was smitten, He was crucified, He was spoken evil against falsely. What a contrast! The Son of man, a man of sorrows and acquainted with griefs, was forsaken even

by His disciples in His greatest hour of need. Do you shrink from suffering for Him? Despite Jesus' suffering, where was His eye? His eye was focused on the will of His Father. That's where the anchor of our hope, and where our eye must be focused as well; so it does not fall on the circumstances and the persecutions which befall us, but falls upon the will of our heavenly Father. That's why Paul writes to Timothy, "But out of them all the Lord delivered me." This glorious deliverance is our third thought. First let us sing from Psalter 152: 1, 2, 3, 5.

APPLICATION

Paul writes to Timothy, "But out of them all the Lord delivered me." Paul is implying by these words that in each persecution he encountered, the Lord was faithful to His word. He has given words to speak. He has given the strength in the hour of need. Paul is saying that whatever affliction Timothy or God's people are called to endure, the Lord delivers out of them all. That's the comfort that Paul wants Timothy to rejoice in as well. "Timothy," he says, "you are surrounded by false teachers. I see them on every side, and they are denying the Lord who bought them. Evil men and seducers are waxing worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. Despite all of this, the Lord delivers out of all things."

The Lord does not send a persecution, a trial in our life, but He gives grace to undergo it. Didn't He also say to Paul, "My strength is sufficient for thee"? And so, dear believer, this truth is the same also for you. Your Father has set boundaries for Satan which he cannot pass in your life. The very hairs of your head are numbered. Are not the thoughts that come into your mind, the persecutions and afflictions that come from without, also in the hand of Him with whom we have to do? If you are mocked and ridiculed for your convictions and beliefs, if you are threatened that you will have no friends, does not Christ promise to be a friend that sticks closer than a brother?

If you are tempted by your own wicked heart, take courage, for one day that old man nature shall finally be put to death in the grave. You shall be clothed with the glory of Christ. You shall appear like Him when He appears. Are you forsaken by family and friends? Fear not, the Lord will reveal Himself unto you and be that Friend who sticks closer than a brother. Are you afraid that someday you will be cast into prison or do you fear that your body will be racked with the shackles of

iron and then you will deny Him? Even then, Christ will send His angels to minister His own presence in your heart by His Word and Spirit to comfort you. This is a comfort, my friends, which the world can never give you. There is no comfort like that in this world.

But this comfort is only for those who are in Christ Jesus. We read of a martyr who cried at the stake, "Come you papists, if you want a miracle, here behold one as we are in this bed of flames. This is a bed of flames, but to us, it is a bed of down." Fear not them who can harm your body. Fear not men; once they have destroyed the body they can do no more, but fear God; He alone is able to destroy body and soul in hell. Though you be threatened to be burned alive, think of Daniel and his three friends; Christ will be in the midst of the flame with you or those flames themselves will be the chariot that ushers you to glory into the presence of the One you love. O dare, dare to live godly in Christ Jesus though you suffer all manner of persecution. Isn't that what we read from 2 Corinthians 4? "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed.... Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body....For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

We cannot live godly in Christ Jesus, unless we are under the sway and dominion of Jesus Christ Himself. Are you energized by the grace and Spirit of Christ? From whom is your fruit found? Can you say: "We live, yet not we, but Christ lives in us and the life we live in the flesh, we live by the faith of the Son of God"? That is the glorious deliverance that is promised to the church of God, to all who live godly in Christ Jesus. Jesus Himself says in Luke 21, "Lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh," and furthermore he says, "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." And when by faith we may see that we are made one with Him, then the One who has overcome the world gives us the power and the strength we need to live godly in Christ Jesus, to endure the persecution, suffering, and trial that comes upon us. This was Paul's hope, this was Paul's confidence, this was his consolation. Child of God, this ought to be yours as well. How does Paul conclude his letter to Timothy? In prison, enduring

persecution, he writes to Timothy, "Continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them." He writes in chapter 4, "For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing." Then he concludes saying, "Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever."

There are several questions we set before you today. Since all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution, the first question is: Are you living godly? Are you living out of Christ or are you still living for your own account? Is Satan your father, the one whom you serve, or can you say, "Our Father which art in heaven?" Are you in Christ Jesus? The second question is: Are you being persecuted or are you a persecutor? Are you being persecuted without cause or are there causes other than Christ Himself that explain why people persecute you?

We read in Revelation 12, "And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death." Do you know the accuser of the brethren, who often persecutes within, sometimes even more than the world persecutes without? When he comes and points to a particular sin, to a going astray, when he says, now there is no hope for you-do you realize that we are

called to overcome him in the blood of the Lamb? Then on that day, when we have overcome him in Christ Jesus, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself shall wipe away every tear from our eyes, every sorrow from our heart. He will hold us in His tender, loving embrace, and we shall be forever with the Lord. AMEN.