

## 11. Promise to the Persecuted (3Q 2012—1 and 2 Thessalonians)

**Biblical material:** 2 Thess. 1:1–12, John 1:18, Rom. 2:5, 12:19, Rev. 16:4–7, 20:1–6, John 14:1–3.

### Quotes

- In politics, as in religion, it is equally absurd to aim at making proselytes by fire and sword. Heresies in either can rarely be cured by persecution. *Alexander Hamilton*
- Scripture makes it clear to me that there is an obligation to speak out on behalf of those being persecuted. *Frank R. Wolf*
- Virtue is persecuted more by the wicked than it is loved by the good. *Buddha*
- Let us not forget: we are a pilgrim church, subject to misunderstanding, to persecution, but a church that walks serene, because it bears the force of love. *Oscar A. Romero*
- If the Tiber rises too high, or the Nile too low, the remedy is always feeding Christians to the lions. *Tertullian*
- If you live in such a manner as to stand the test of the last judgment, you can depend upon it that the world will not speak well of you. *Alistair Begg*
- Be of good comfort, Mr. Ridley, and play the man! We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace, in England, as I trust never shall be put out. *Hugh Latimer*

### Questions

What should our attitude be to persecution? In what way does this reveal the issues in the great controversy? How can we best help those today who are suffering persecution? What does Jesus warn us regarding our experience in this world? How does Paul try to encourage the Thessalonians? How do we understand the issue of “wrath”? What is the real message for us here?

### Bible summary

In 2 Thess. 1:1–12 Paul is writing to the believers once again. This time the situation has taken a turn for the worse—they are being persecuted. His theme is summed in verse 4: “We speak so proudly of you among the churches of God because of your patient courage and trust in God during all the persecution and trouble you’re going through.” (2 Thess. 1:4 FBV). This is why Paul speaks so strongly in verses 7 and 8—for when you are suffering you need to be reassured that your cause is right! John 1:18 reminds us why Jesus came: to show us the Father. It is the unrepentant heart that “stores up for itself wrath,” (Rom. 2:5); however we do not take revenge but leave the resolution of all things to God (Rom. 12:19).

How are we to understand the seven plagues described in Rev. 16? What do they tell us about the end, and what do they tell us about God? The judgment that is promised in Rev. 20 shows that there is a final resolution to all of this—and that God is shown to have always acted in ways that are true and right. Jesus’ promise in John 14:1-3 is to return to take his friends home with him. Here’ is the vital message of promise for all

those who are suffering—this is not the end! God looks forward to having us home with him, forever in his presence.

### **Comment**

The real crime for an increasing number of Christians worldwide is just that—they're Christians. More than ethnic or political or national labels, the crime of being Christian is one that makes an easy target. In today's world, Christianity is the most persecuted religion, with its believers experiencing more suffering harassment, violence, imprisonment and death than ever before. In fact, more Christians have died for their faith in the past century than in all the previous centuries combined, a horrific and immensely tragic statistic for a global society that likes to think of itself as advanced and tolerant...

The freedom to believe, including sharing belief with others, is one of the basic freedoms that make up human rights. Such freedom is expressive of human dignity. The denial of such religious freedom cuts at the heart of humanity, and both persecutor and the persecuted are the less because of such intolerance.

The reasons for such persecution of Christians are many, but come down to the denial of the right to choose belief. Whether it is the desire to remain in power, or the desire to impose a religious regime, or a cynical way of providing scapegoats, attacks on Christians say much about such persecutors.

Dictators have long recognized that Christianity is subversive to their absolute power. Christians value freedom, human dignity, the right to choose, individual responsibility, and owe allegiance to a higher authority. Roman emperors recognized this challenge to their absolute rule, and with logical ruthlessness attacked the Christian community. Additionally false propaganda was spread that Christians indulged in human sacrifice during the celebration of communion, while the persecution under Nero shows the scapegoat role placed on Christians.

It's estimated that more than one hundred million Christians died for their faith in the last century. Over a billion people live under regimes that deny fundamental freedoms, especially religious freedom. One estimate of the number of those who lose their lives because of their faith is 170,000 every year, but this is certainly on the low side. Why? Because much of the religious-inspired killing is done in secret, and there are no reliable statistics. However, one thing is sure: this world is descending into even greater violence and oppression against those whose beliefs differ from the majority.

From a historical perspective, we shouldn't be surprised. Persecution has happened so often, and to find it continuing today is no surprise. If you look back in time you will discover much in the way of persecution. Whether it is done by individuals, groups, or even the state, the attitude is the same: we have the truth, which gives us license to persecute and kill you the "heretics." Whether it's Emperor Nero or the dominant faith or a zealot like Saul before he became Paul, persecution has as its ideology a perverted concept of what "the truth" demands. Excuses are made that it is for the greater good, that in some way those being persecuted "deserve" it, but the result is always the same: the use of evil in an attempt to enforce "the good."

Particularly bad are those situations in which religion is hijacked in the service of persecution. Believing themselves to be absolutely right, those with the power persecute

others in the name of their religion, cloaking their evil with ideas of “a moral crusade,” “for the betterment of society,” or even “for the heretics’ good.”

So for example you have many cases from the time of the Reformation where a priest is holding out a crucifix to a “heretic” being burned at the stake. They are trying, even at this late stage, to have the “heretic recant,” and so even though the body may be killed, the soul can be saved from purgatory and hell. In this perverted theology it doesn’t really matter if you are burned to death in this life, as long as you are saved from everlasting burning in the next life...

All this evil persecution is done in God’s name, as a “religious duty,” trying to “save” those who do not believe as the persecutor does. As Stephen Weinberg wrote, “With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil—that takes religion.” So sad, so true.

What of the picture of God in all of this, though? What kind of God endorses persecution, hatred between human beings? Did Jesus ever tell us to persecute others? Where does the spirit of persecution come from? Clearly this is of the Devil himself, clothing God with his own malevolent character as he tries to win the battle for the mind that is the Great Controversy. Think of how persecution plays out from this perspective!

### **Ellen White Comments**

The men and women who through the long centuries of persecution and trial enjoyed a large measure of the presence of the Spirit in their lives, have stood as signs and wonders in the world. Before angels and men they have revealed the transforming power of redeeming love. {AA 49}

What was the strength of those who in the past have suffered persecution for Christ’s sake? It was union with God, union with the Holy Spirit, union with Christ. Reproach and persecution have separated many from earthly friends, but never from the love of Christ. Never is the tempest-tried soul more dearly loved by His Saviour than when he is suffering reproach for the truth’s sake. “I will love him,” Christ said, “and will manifest Myself to him.” John 14:21. When for the truth’s sake the believer stands at the bar of earthly tribunals, Christ stands by his side. When he is confined within prison walls, Christ manifests Himself to him and cheers his heart with His love. When he suffers death for Christ’s sake, the Saviour says to him, They may kill the body, but they cannot hurt the soul. “Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.” John 16:33. {AA 85-86}

In all ages Satan has persecuted the people of God. He has tortured them and put them to death, but in dying they became conquerors. They bore witness to the power of One mightier than Satan. Wicked men may torture and kill the body, but they cannot touch the life that is hid with Christ in God. They can incarcerate men and women in prison walls, but they cannot bind the spirit.

Through trial and persecution the glory—the character—of God is revealed in His chosen ones. . . . They follow Christ through sore conflicts; they endure self-denial and experience bitter disappointments; but thus they learn the guilt and woe of sin, and they look upon it with abhorrence. Being partakers of Christ’s sufferings, they can look beyond the gloom to the glory, saying, “I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18). {CC 360}

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