

PERSECUTION – A SIGN OF GOD’S GRACE

The Book of Philippians #9

We are in the book of Philippians the first chapter. Having already looked at Paul’s situation while in prison in Rome and his expectation of being released, we now turn to the final verses of chapter one in which Paul’s main theme of Christian conduct is introduced. We find this in verses 27-30 of chapter 1.

After assuring the Philippians that he was going to live and not die, Paul gives instructions for their conduct or manner of life and what they can expect in return from the world.

PHILIPPIANS 1:27-30

“Only conduct your selves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one faith of the gospel; in no way alarmed by your opponents – which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God. For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and hear to be in me.”

You may remember that Paul was convinced that he would be released from jail. What he was not sure of is whether or not he would be able to visit the church in Philippi again. But whether he sees them in person or not he wants to hear of their standing firm in their faith. And that is why he gives them these instructions.

So what is it that Paul wants to hear about their conduct? The first thing he says he wants to hear is that they are:

UNITED

“Whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel;”

Paul wants to make sure they are standing firm in one spirit, striving together for the faith of the gospel. In other words he wants to hear that they are acting as one and united in purpose. But why would this be of a concern to Paul? God makes unity possible for all Christians through His indwelling Spirit. And Paul has already mentioned the unity of the Philippians’ prayers for him, their unity in participating in the gospel and of their united confidence in him. So what ‘unity’ is Paul talking about? In order to understand what Paul is asking we have to put his request in the context in which it was written by looking at the verses that follow.

In verse 28-30 Paul provides the reason for his request for unity. He wants them to be united in spirit and mind so that:

That they will NOT (be) ALARMED BY THEIR OPPONENTS

“Whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel;”
in no way alarmed by your opponents - which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you...”

So the second thing that Paul wants to hear about his fellow believers in Philippi is that they are not alarmed by their opponents.

If anyone would know about opposition it would be Paul. He has had perhaps more first-hand experience with opposition to the gospel than any other believer in recorded history. He has been on both the receiving and the giving end of persecution. So he knows of what he speaks. And it might seem odd at first glance that Paul expects the same to happen to the Philippians but remember what happened to Paul & Silas on their first visit to Philippi. They were beaten and thrown in prison. So Paul's concern is justified in light of his own personal experience in Philippi.

But Jesus warned of the opposition as well in John 15:20, where He says.

JOHN 15:20

"Remember the word that I (Jesus) said to you, 'A slave 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."

Jesus even instructed us how to handle ourselves when we were hauled before the authorities.

LUKE 12:11

"When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not worry about how or what you are to speak in your defense, or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."

So persecution for believing in Jesus is something that Jesus told us to watch out for and expect. And Paul states as much in verses 29 and 30.

"For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me."

Now if you're like me some verses are very comforting and other verses make me nervous. These are some of those verses that make me a little nervous. Suffering persecution for the sake of the gospel of Christ by some people sometimes is one thing. But Paul says that it is not just something that might occur infrequently to some but that persecution has been granted to all believers and could come at any time.

When he writes, *"It has been granted to you...not only to believe... but also to suffer..."*, he is equating believing with suffering. He is putting them on the same plane. Just like the gift of eternal life comes through faith, so does persecution. Just like salvation is the free gift of God, persecution is also a gift God grants to His people. Some gift! And I don't know about you but I have yet to see any option to "return to sender" on the gift box.

What makes it even more interesting is that the Greek word translated here as "granted" means to show favor or kindness. This word is closely related to the Greek word translated as "grace". So God is granting us favor and showering grace upon us as He allows us to be persecuted; A strange concept indeed for we who live in America and have suffered so little persecution up till now.

Yet it reminds me of the response of Peter and the Apostles had when they were brought before the Jewish Council and flogged before they were released. Here is their response:

ACTS 5:41-42

So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. And every day in the temple and from house to house, they kept

right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”

Now rejoicing because you have been considered worthy to suffer shame is a concept that is foreign to me. Not that I have not had my share of some types of persecution or suffering for one thing or another – how I looked, how I dressed, what I said, what I didn’t say, what kind of car I drove or what type of house I lived in, even the type of friends I hung around with or how my kids did or did not behave.

For me it started on my first school bus ride in 1963. I was starting in a new school in a new city and had to take the bus to get there because it was 5 1/2 miles away from where I lived. The bigger guys were picking on a smaller guy and I did not like it but I was also small and could not do much about it. So when we got on the bus I noticed everyone passed this guy by, some even hitting him as they passed. Well I decided to sit next to him to help him avoid this harassment - a noble gesture which to this day I do not regret. However that one act of kindness got me labeled as his equal, so I became the brunt of the bigger guy’s jokes and the object of their harassment. As the weeks went by I don’t think I ever saw that guy at school only on the bus. But by then I figured I had my own problems and I would sit as far away from trouble as possible. This persecution lasted for two years until my family moved back to my home town of Antioch.

But these types of harassment were common enough in my growing up years and most of us have come to expect a certain amount of this type of “persecution” at certain points in our life. Nowadays we have an official label for it. We call it ‘bullying’ and give classes to teach all of us how to stop doing it. Unfortunately we don’t teach people how to handle it anymore. We just teach people how to avoid or correct it.

But Paul’s not talking about what we might call “normal” persecution. He is talking about suffering because we believe and preach that Jesus is the Christ. Pastor Saeed Abedini knows about this. Miriam Abraham knows about this. Paul and the other apostles know about this. And Christians down through the ages, especially during the time of the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages, were also very aware of this type of persecution.

Even today, perhaps especially today, we have seen in our own headlines the atrocities of terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria, as well as in Libya and Indonesia and some of the African nations. In countries such as China, North Korea, Iran, and Pakistan the leaders of those countries sanction the persecution of Christians. So persecution is not something which just happened during biblical times. It continues today. In fact it has been stated that there are more Christians being persecuted today than there have been throughout all of history combined.

“According to the International Society for Human Rights, a secular group with members in 38 states worldwide, 80 per cent of all acts of religious discrimination in the world today are directed at Christians.

The Center for the Study of Global Christianity in the United States estimates that 100,000 Christians now die every year, targeted because of their faith – that is 11 every hour. The Pew Research Center says that hostility to religion reached a new high in 2012, when Christians faced some form of discrimination in 139 countries, almost three-quarters of the world's nations.

Christians are languishing in jail for blasphemy in Pakistan, and churches are burned and worshippers regularly slaughtered in Nigeria and Egypt, which has recently seen its worst anti-Christian violence in seven centuries.

The most violent anti-Christian pogrom of the early 21st century saw as many as 500 Christians hacked to death by machete-wielding Hindu radicals in Orissa, India, with thousands more injured and 50,000 made homeless. In Burma, Chin and Karen Christians are routinely subjected to imprisonment, torture, forced labor and murder.

Persecution is increasing in China; and in North Korea a quarter of the country's Christians live in forced labor camps after refusing to join the national cult of the state's founder, Kim Il-Sung. Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and the Maldives all feature in the 10 worst places to be a Christian."

I am quoting these figures from an article published in "The Independent" and written by Paul Vallely, a former Chief Rabbi and a visiting professor of ethics at Chester University, England. © independent.co.uk (This article can be found by going to this link: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/christians-the-worlds-most-persecuted-people-9630774.html>)

So what Paul is writing here to the Philippians is just as relevant today as it was when it was first written nearly 2,000 years ago.

Here in America we are just beginning to see the effects of suppressing Christianity in the workplace and in the government. In the 60's we had a ruling that removed prayer from schools and these types of rulings, though few and far between, have increased in their influence on society. There is an open hostility to Biblical Christianity now arising in America. Notice I said Biblical Christianity. There are some portions of Christendom which have embraced the secular redefinition of sin and are not at this point in the same danger of persecution as those of us who hold tightly to God's Word. But for those who do persecution is a reality.

Just ask some of the bakers, florists, photographers, CEO's, firemen, academic and scientific teachers and leaders who have lost their businesses and jobs, and in some cases are in danger of losing their homes and possessions simply because they decided to stand on Biblical morality when operating in the marketplace rather than forsake their beliefs.

These people may not feel their lives are being threatened, but certainly their livelihoods are. Freedom of religion in America is quickly turning into freedom from religion. And unless the church stands up against it we will all live to see persecution grow here on our own soil. And when that happens how will we respond? And until it happens how will we prepare?

Now I am not an alarmist. I do not even like to think about the prospect of having to face any kind of persecution for my faith. And if we were honest with each other we would probably all say at times we haven't even opened our mouths to speak about the gospel for fear of what someone might think of us. But how will we ever face a loss of a job or a house or possessions for the sake of Christ, let alone imprisonment, torture or death for our faith like our brothers and sisters across the world are currently experiencing if we won't even speak of our faith for fear of embarrassment or ridicule?

So I believe what Paul is saying to the Philippians here in the first chapter in verses 27-29 has a great deal of relevance to believers today, even those of us who live in America and suffer so much less than other believers around the world.

When the 21 Coptic Christians were recently beheaded by ISIS in Libya a videotape was released

showing these gruesome deeds. I did not watch this video, nor do I wish to. But what I read is that at the end of the tape, at the moment of their execution, all 21 of these believers spoke the name of Jesus. His name was the last thing on their lips. They were united and not alarmed by their opponents because they knew they were moments away from being ushered into eternity.

I will speak more about these in a moment, but these are just a handful of the multitudes being killed for their faith in Jesus today. Just this week nearly 300 Christians (and this number fluctuates between news sources) were captured by ISIS in north-east Syria, a place which has been predominantly Christian since the third century A.D. Churches and crosses are being burned, women and children sold as sex-slaves and men slaughtered simply because of their belief in Jesus.

As the number of those who are martyred for their faith increases I can't help but think of the passage in Revelation 6:9-11, which says,

REVELATION 6:9-11

“When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’ And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also.”

Even the Lord Himself says here that persecution would continue until the number is complete. When will it be complete? How many is enough? We are not told. But we can be assured that when Christ comes the number will have been fulfilled. Until then we must wait and pray. Paul understood this uncomfortable concept. Paul experienced this truth - that persecution is part of the life of a Christian. And, as Paul says, it has been granted to us to experience suffering as part of our belief in Christ. This is not “normal” suffering. This is suffering because we believe in Christ and stand our ground when living out biblical truths.

Paul is saying that suffering for Christ is to be expected. But what Paul is also saying is that suffering persecution is not a sign of the abandonment of God but rather a sign of God's special grace granted to us as believers. Most of us feel when things go awry, that God has either abandoned us or does not care for us. Yet what this passage says is that the same love that prompted God to give His only Son so that we by faith might receive eternal life is the same love God expresses when He grants us the ability to suffer for His name's sake. Persecution is a sign of God's love, not of God's abandonment. This is a concept that is worth exploring because it is so contrary to what we normally believe and it certainly feels uncomfortable to contemplate. Yet it is a truth which we cannot deny. And I believe it is a truth better understood by those who, like Peter and Paul and John, have experienced this type of persecution.

Not all who were imprisoned died a martyr's death. Some survived. Paul and Peter were killed by Rome after being beaten and imprisoned. But John survived many persecutions until the end of his life when he was banished by Rome to the Isle of Patmos because of his Christian beliefs. Whether he died on the Isle of Patmos or not is in dispute. What is not in dispute is that he did not die at the hands of the Romans but rather died a natural death just as Jesus had predicted (John 21:20-24). This is what we pray for those recently captured and continue to pray for Pastor Abedini. That even though God has granted them to ability to suffer for their faith that God would also grant them release from prison as he did many times for both for Peter and Paul.

And God has not abandoned those in prison, just as He did not abandon Peter or Paul or John. God emboldened them to speak out to those who are in desperate need of a Savior, loving even the very soldiers who are tormenting them because of their love for Christ.

Corrie ten Boom was a young Dutch Christian when her family hid Jews in their home during the second world war. The family was eventually arrested and Corrie lost her father and mother and sister in the concentration camps. Corrie's sister Betsie was someone who saw God in the worst of circumstances. Corrie did not share this viewpoint initially but came to realize that God had not forsaken them even in their miserable conditions. At one time the barracks in which she and her sister were housed had an infestation of fleas. It made their life miserable. But Corrie's sister pointed out that because their barracks had fleas the guards left them alone and would not enter it. As a result the harassment of the guards ceased and they were free to pray and speak of the Lord and to minister to one another with the hope of the gospel. Without those fleas they would not have been able to do that. The fleas became a comfort to Corrie once she saw that God was bringing a blessing in the midst of a flea-infested concentration camp barracks. God was in their midst, even if it meant He came in carrying fleas!

During several of our services we have read excerpts from letters Pastor Abedini that have been shared with the public. These letters have shown that God has not forsaken him in the midst of his imprisonment and torture. They show a man still dedicated to the Lord and still able to experience His presence in the midst of one of the most brutal prisons in Iran.

As recently as a few short weeks ago Pastor Abedini's father was able to visit him and the men were able to pray and read the Bible together as guards watched. Pastor Abedini's wife Naghmeh posted on her Facebook page that "The normal 20 minute visit turned into 40 minutes which turned into an hour which turned into a few hours! Saeed and his father were shocked the amount of time that they were allowed. The presence of the Lord was so strong that the guards did not want to intervene and end the visit! Praise the Lord!" She also said Saeed was able to hear words of encouragement from those praying for him, and was reminded that he is not forgotten.

So God can be present in the midst of suffering. Paul knew this. How else could he be praying and singing hymns of praise to God after having just been beaten and thrown in a Philippian jail unjustly (Acts 16:22-25)? Why else would Jesus call "blessed" those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness? And why would Jesus say to those who have been insulted and falsely accused of all kinds of evil against them because of Him to rejoice and be glad, for their reward in heaven is great? (Matthew 5:10-11)

Peter experienced in real life what Jesus proclaimed from the hilltops. And he echoes the words of Jesus when he says, "*When you do what is right, suffer for it and patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.*" (1 Peter 2:20). What he is saying is you are blessed with God's favor when you suffer persecution and patiently endure it.

As a fellow believer who suffered persecution for the sake of Christ Peter was well aware of what suffering entails. But he was equally aware of what suffering was intended to do for the believer. For he says:

1 PETER 4:12-19

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If

you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name.

“For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner? Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.”

So Peter’s words resonate with the words of Paul when he says that even in the midst of being persecuted for righteousness sake God is doing what is right. God is indeed granting believers something that will result in being blessed. Knowing this, Peter says that those who suffer must entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right, and that we should not be surprised when these ordeals come our way, as if it were something strange.

Peter says that suffering is to be expected, Paul says that suffering is something that has been granted to us, and Jesus says that we are blessed when we suffer for His name. Why? Peter tells us why. He says that being reviled for the sake of Christ is proof that the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon us.

That is why Peter and the apostles rejoiced that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name after being flogged and ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus (Acts 5:40-41). It was proof that the Spirit of glory and of God had rested upon them.

And this is at the heart of what Paul is saying as well. It has been granted to all believers not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake. That is why Paul says it is so important to:

PHILIPPIANS 1:27-28

“Conduct (our)selves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ so that (we can stand) firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; in no way alarmed by our opponents – which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for us, and that too, from God.”

For far too long the church as a whole has been preoccupied with its differences. And this has caused the division between believers to grow through the centuries. Some of this is understandable and necessary. Believers who wish to hold to the truth of Scripture must separate from those who no longer see the Bible as an authority to be revered in order to preserve the purity of the gospel for themselves and future generations. But the church has gone beyond the basic stand for the gospel and has ventured into minor issues that have no eternal consequence. As a result, the world sees a divided church with believers who are intolerant of each other’s idiosyncrasies and does not associate with anyone who deviates from a particular doctrine or practice.

But I guarantee you that if and when persecution comes to us here in America it will not matter whether you are a Catholic, a Pentecostal, an Assembly of God, a Baptist, a Presbyterian, a Methodist, a Lutheran, an Independent, or any other Christian denomination. We will not argue over doctrine. We will not forsake the gathering of ourselves together because some believe in sprinkling and some in immersion, or distance ourselves from one another because some believe in Jesus coming before and some after the Great Tribulation. When that day comes, as the saying goes, “We is all in trouble now”. And we will need each other to stand firm in our faith.

When persecution comes, as Paul says it will, we must not be divided, but rather united in our struggle to hang on to the faith we all share and to seek after the God we all love and serve – to persevere to the end so that we all might receive the crown of glory that awaits us when the Chief Shepherd appears (1 Peter 5:4).

We will need each other to endure the days ahead. And we will join together to seek after and shelter those who are suffering because we belong to one body and one mind, and are striving together for the faith of the gospel.

This is what Paul wants of the believers in Philippi and this is what we too should strive after - to stand firm in the face of opposition to the gospel, not at all alarmed by our opponents, but standing firm in one spirit and with one mind striving together with believers in all denominations across America and the world for the faith of the gospel.

It is upon this rock of faith that Christ said He would build His church. And he said that the gates of Hell would not prevail against it. Let us not be ashamed to speak of the gospel but let us also not be naïve about what might happen to us when we do. Peter says it is not a strange thing that will happen to us, it is an expected thing. And Paul says it is something that has been granted to us by God to endure.

So if God has granted to us the ability and privilege to suffer for His name's sake, let us not concern ourselves with avoiding it. We live in America, not in Iran, so the consequences of speaking out are treated differently here, at least for now. But if the freedom from religion people continue to step up their fight against those of us who love Jesus, then things could get worse for us here in America as well. So it's better to understand and embrace the persecution that God has granted to us now before the consequences grow worse.

Not all of us may suffer for speaking out or living out our faith. But some certainly have and it seems to be increasing. And that is why I felt obligated to let you know that persecution is normal, not abnormal. We may have not experienced it yet and some may even die before they do, but persecution for the sake of Christ is a given. Better to be aware of this fact so that it does not take us unawares if and when it comes. Because Paul says:

PHILIPPIANS 1:29

“To you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.”

As I close I don't want us to forsake or forget those who are suffering for Christ even as we speak. I have purposely kept the prayers for Pastor Saeed and the victims of Isis to the end of my sermon because we now know that God has granted to them for Christ's sake, not only to believe, but also to suffer for His sake. Let's then pray as Paul did for them to stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel and in no way alarmed by their opponents, which is a sign of destruction for their opponents, but of salvation for them.

TIME OF CORPORATE PRAYER FOR PERSECUTED BELIEVERS

As I close I want to make mention of an article in Christianity Today written by Jayson Casper in Cairo and published in their February 23, 2015 edition. He has reported the following:

“The beheadings by the Islamic State in Libya have resulted in unprecedented sympathy for Egypt’s Christians, who are increasingly finding common identity across denominational lines. The

martyrdoms have also allowed Copts a platform to witness to the realities of their faith, as they publicly forgave the terrorists. (And) undaunted by the slaughter of 21 Christians in Libya, the director of the Bible Society of Egypt saw a golden gospel opportunity.

“We must have a Scripture tract ready to distribute to the nation as soon as possible,” Ramez Atallah told his staff the evening an ISIS-linked group released its gruesome propaganda video. Less than 36 hours later, *Two Rows by the Sea* was sent to the printer. One week later, 1.65 million copies have been distributed in the Bible Society’s largest campaign ever.

“The design is meant so that it can be given to any Egyptian without causing offense,” said Atallah. “To comfort the mourning and challenge people to commit to Christ.” The tract contains biblical quotations about the promise of blessing amid suffering, alongside a poignant poem in colloquial Arabic. Here is what the English translation of the poem says:

TWO ROWS BY THE SEA

Two rows of men walked the shore of the sea
On a day when the world’s tears would run free
One a row of assassins, who thought they did right
The other of innocents, true sons of the light
One holding knives in hands held high
The other with hands empty, defenseless and tied
One row of slits to conceal glaring dead eyes
The other with living eyes raised to the skies
One row stood steady, pall-bearers of death
The other knelt ready, welcoming heaven’s breath
One row spewed wretched, contemptible threats
The other spread God-given peace and rest
...A Question? Who fears the other
The row in orange, watching paradise open
Or the row in black, with minds evil and broken?

Printed on the side of the tract are these words:
WHICH ROW PLEASES GOD?

“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell....Whoever acknowledges me before men I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men I will disown him before my Father in heaven.” (Mathew 10:28, 32, 33) (*Two Rows By The Sea* © Bible Society of Egypt)

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, when we face persecution may we be as brave as those who have gone before us. May we acknowledge You before those who despise us in spite of the threat of death. May we disown all we have in this world but never disown You before men. When we are persecuted may we rejoice because we have been considered worthy to suffer shame for Your name. And may we remember that when we are reviled for the name of Christ that we are blessed because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon us. We pray these things in the name of Jesus, the One who suffered so much for us. Amen.