

Preparing for Persecution

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Introduction

According to the Pew Research Center, 183 out of 198 governments in the world were harassing religious groups in 2021. This was the largest number of countries since Pew began their research in 2007. These findings are announced in their 2024 annual report which was published this month, and cover the period 2007-2021. At the same time Pew's researchers found that "social hostilities involving religion" – including violence and harassment by private individuals, organisations or groups – were gradually declining from a peak in 2017.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/03/05/globally-government-restrictions-on-religion-reached-peak-levels-in-2021-while-social-hostilities-went-down/#Government-restrictions-and-government-benefits>

Pew's figures, which cover all religions including extreme sects, of course reflect the information that can be discovered by research. The full and true picture is known only to God. But we can be sure that our Christian brothers and sisters are suffering greatly for their allegiance to Christ.

- In Nigeria an estimated 45,000 Christians have died in anti-Christian violence since 2009.
- In Algeria 49 church buildings in Algeria have been forced to close by the authorities, leaving only about seven open.
- In countries such as Afghanistan, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia and Somalia there is a death sentence for apostasy from Islam, creating great danger for Christian converts from a Muslim background.
- In North Korea believers are sent to labour camps where they suffer terribly and sometimes die. Even owning a Bible can result in execution.
- In Eritrea Christians of certain denominations are imprisoned without charge or trial for years on end, in the harshest of conditions.
- In Pakistan many hundreds of people of all religions have been accused under the infamous "blasphemy law". The majority of these were malicious false accusations but there is a death penalty for "defiling the name of" the Islamic prophet Muhammad, making these false accusations very dangerous. Christians are particularly vulnerable under this law: individual Christians have spent many years in prison and several wide-scale anti-Christian riots have been triggered by blasphemy accusations.

The joy of being persecuted for Christ

We may be appalled at the persecution that our brothers and sisters are enduring, but we should not be surprised. It is a normal part of Christian life. Very early in His ministry, the

Lord Jesus spoke about it in what we call “the Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5-7). This section of our Lord’s teaching was addressed specifically to His disciples (Matthew 5:1).

In the ancient world, a disciple (Greek *mathetes*) was a dedicated learner who not only tried to absorb the teaching of their master but also wanted to interact with him and try to imitate his way of life, with the hope of eventually becoming like him. Personal, deep and permanent commitment to their master, for example a Jewish rabbi, was the main characteristic of a disciple. The Sermon on the Mount is therefore addressed to all of Christ’s committed followers today, for we – if we have given our lives to Him – are His disciples, just like those who gathered around Him on that mountainside long ago.

Matthew tells us that, in order to deliver this teaching, Jesus sat down and opened His mouth (Matthew 5:1-2). Some Bible translations remove the apparently redundant words about opening His mouth and simply state that Jesus began to teach. But these translations lose an important layer of meaning. The phrase to “open one’s mouth” was used in Greek to flag up to the reader that something unusually important was coming. It was a phrase that prefaced either a solemn and weighty utterance or an outpouring from the heart at a very intimate level. We must add to this the information that Jesus was sitting down when He spoke. When a Jewish rabbi was doing official teaching, he sat down. He might give unofficial teaching when standing or walking around, but he would sit down to deliver his main and central teaching. So we know that what Jesus is about to say to His disciples is of paramount importance.

Jesus begins with what we now call the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12). If the Sermon on the Mount is the heart of Jesus’s radical teaching, then the Beatitudes are the heart of that heart. They describe the inner attitudes of a follower of Christ, attitudes which bear fruit in the outward actions described in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

The word “beatitude” means a state of supreme bliss. Most English Bibles start these statements of Jesus with the word “blessed”, but in many ways “happy” is a clearer translation.¹ The original word in the Greek New Testament was *makarios*, which meant a kind of Divine joy, a secure joy that cannot be shaken by circumstances. It is a joy that no one can take away from us, as Jesus promised His disciples some three years later, just before the crucifixion (John 16:22).

Of course, Jesus was not speaking Greek when He taught His disciples on the mountain. He was speaking Aramaic, so He probably used a common Aramaic expression, beginning each statement with *ashere*. This was an exclamation that we could translate as “O the blessedness of...” or “O the bliss of...” It shows that the joy we are promised is for now. It is not a glimpse of future glory, but something that has already started (and will become full and complete in heaven). The joys that Jesus describes are not a beautiful fairytale to sigh over; they are real life for Christ’s followers.

The eighth and last beatitude is almost as long as the first seven beatitudes put together. In this beatitude, Jesus changes from speaking of “they” to saying directly and personally “you”. He tells us, His disciples, of the wonderful blessings in store for those who are persecuted for His sake.

¹ It is confusing that the English “happy” has its roots more than 500 years ago in the Middle English word “hap” meaning “good luck”, which suggests a joy dependent on circumstances. That is the exact opposite of what Jesus is teaching here. The nuances and shades of meaning that the word lost half a millennium ago should not be applied to it now. It should be understood simply as happiness in its plain everyday 21st-century meaning.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:10-12)²

Jesus emphasises how blissfully happy we should be if we endure persecution for His sake. He does not simply say, “Rejoice.” He adds, “be glad” or, in other translations, “be supremely joyful” or “exult”. The Greek word used is *agalliaithe*, meaning “to leap exceedingly” or to “skip and shout for joy”. If you are persecuted, jump for joy!

This rejoicing is mainly when the persecution is over and primarily concerns our future heavenly reward. We are not masochists; we do not enjoy the suffering itself. Nevertheless, there can be joy even in the midst of persecution. Many believers testify to having felt the Lord closer to them during persecution than at any other time in their lives. This in itself is a wonderful blessing, a joy and a foretaste of heaven.

Like all afflictions, persecution should purify us and make us more like Jesus.

when he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold. (Job 23:10).

Normally this is by fine-tuning our characters.

... we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. (Romans 5:3-4)

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters,^[a] whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4)

However, there are other wonderful and mysterious ways in which it can happen. “I bear on my body the marks of Jesus,” wrote the Apostle Paul (Galatians 6:17). Persecution had made Paul like Jesus in this literal and physical way.

Believers who do not understand how helpful, even necessary, persecution is to our spiritual growth, who therefore try to avoid it rather than submit willingly to it, are greatly discouraged when they do experience it.

Persecution can be welcomed as an opportunity to show our loyalty to Christ. Through persecution we can join the great company of prophets, saints and martyrs. Perhaps this was the dominant thought in the minds of the apostles when, after a flogging (no small thing) and death threats, they left “rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (Acts 5:17-41).

We can even dare to rejoice because our own suffering might make it easier for other disciples to follow Christ faithfully. We may have been inspired to endure by the thought of the believers who have gone before (Hebrews 11:12-38 and many more examples in the 2,000 years since that list was written). If we endure faithfully, we can likewise become an inspiration for others.

² Bible quotations are from the NIV unless otherwise stated.

When we recognise that persecution is a precious gift, some of us, living in countries where physical persecution is unlikely, may wonder wistfully whether the bliss of the eighth beatitude could ever be for us. Jesus, however, mentions what could be called “verbal persecution”: insults and false accusations. There are very few believers, even in Christian-majority societies, who do not experience some kind of verbal attack if they are committed disciples of Jesus.

Jesus Himself experienced both insults and false accusations, and we know that we should expect the same treatment that our Master received (John 15:18-21). Paul writes of the persecution endured by the apostles:

When we are cursed, we bless ... when we are slandered, we answer kindly. (1 Corinthians 4:12-13)

Praise God that He understands the pain and harm that can be caused by cruel or destructive words. Praise God that Jesus graciously affirms that, if we endure this because we are His followers, it puts us in the company of “the prophets who were before” and will bring us the blessing of the kingdom of heaven.

To summarise: persecution is a gift, a privilege, an opportunity, a glory. We do not seek it out but accept it joyfully when it comes.

What about religious liberty?

In this beatitude, at the beginning of His ministry, Jesus prepared His disciples for persecution. Later He reminded them:

... you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings ... (Matthew 10:17-18)

The hatred and persecution will become especially intense in the End Times: “Everyone will hate you because of me” (Luke 21:17).

At the Last Supper, He warned:

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: “A servant is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. (John 15:18-20. See also John 16:1-4.)

The Apostle John wrote: “Do not surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you.” (1 John 3:13)

Nowhere does the New Testament suggest that religious liberty or freedom of conscience is to be the norm for Christians. Those who happen to live under governments which uphold these principles are the exceptions. If we take seriously the Beatitudes, this earthly freedom is not a blessing but perhaps even a hindrance to our spiritual growth and our relationship with the Lord.

When Jesus promised His followers freedom, He was speaking of freedom from the control of sin and Satan, not freedom from the control of governments (Luke 13:12-16; John 8:32-

36). The same message is repeated in the epistles (Romans 6:7,18,20,22; 8:2; Galatians 5:13; Hebrews 2:14-15; 9:15; James 1:25; 2:12; 2 Peter 2:19) and Revelation (Revelation 1:5).

To summarise, the New Testament does not promise religious liberty. Let us expect persecution, prepare for it, and jump for joy when it comes.

Sources of persecution

We can look on the main sources of persecution (as described in Matthew 24 and Luke 21) as a series of six concentric circles, bearing down on the individual at the centre.



1. The outermost circle, enclosing all the others, is **hated by the world**. It is demonic opposition, for “the whole world is under the control of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). That is why our choice to follow Jesus always results in suffering of some kind. We have wrenched ourselves from Satan’s control and he is trying to get us back, whether

by temptation or persecution. Spiritual battle will be our experience for the remainder of our days on earth (Ephesians 6:12). (See Matthew 24:9,15; Luke 21:17.)

2. Inside the circle of spiritual rulers and authorities is the circle of **earthly rulers and authorities**: the governments, bureaucracies and security forces of the countries of our planet. (This circle was the headline focus of the Pew Research Center's study.) These, the structures of the world, are ultimately under Satan's control, even if they have godly believers serving within them. Much persecution of believers through the centuries has come from this source, whether in ancient Rome or modern Eritrea. (See Matthew 24:9,15; Luke 21:12.)
3. Within this circle are the **religious authorities**. All across the world today, Christians are suffering at the hands of extremists of other religions. For example, Islamic religious authorities set the agenda in Iran, resulting in severe restrictions on Christian ministry and the harassment of many individual believers through arrest, imprisonment and various other penalties. (See Matthew 24:9,15; Luke 21:12.)
4. Inside this is the circle of the **local community**, sometimes stirred up deliberately by those in circles further out (Acts 6:12). Many anti-Christian riots in Pakistan are deliberately fomented by a nearby mosque. Jesus would not have been crucified if the people of Jerusalem had not shouted for it, persuaded to do so by the Jewish chief priests and elders (Matthew 27:17-25). The Jewish leaders in Thessalonica deliberately started a riot, trying to target Paul and Silas (Acts 17:5). (See Matthew 24:9,10.)
5. The fifth circle is a Christian's own **friends**, who can become their enemies. "If I had a gun, I would be the first to shoot you because you believe in Jesus Christ. I would put a gun to your head," said a Kyrgyz Muslim when he discovered that his best friend "Marat" had left Islam to follow Christ. Perhaps Marat found comfort remembering that Jesus Himself had been betrayed by one of His close group of friends. (See Matthew 24:10; Luke 21:16.)
6. Even **family** members can become persecutors. This is the sixth circle. When, as a teenager, I decided to leave Islam and follow Jesus Christ, my mother gave me a stark choice: if I continued a Christian, I could no longer be her son. She threw me out of the family home, and I lived for some time on the streets of London. This desperately painful rejection by loved ones is suffered by many who leave another religion to become a disciple of Jesus. I am very thankful to the Lord that my mother took me back again after a while, and some years later my parents both became Christians. But some converts are never received back into the family circle. Their relatives may murder them. Jesus prepared us for the possibility of having to sacrifice our family relationships, if necessary, for Him.

If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother,
wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own
life – such a person cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26).

(See Matthew 24:10; Luke 21:16.)

Responding to persecution

How should Christ's disciples respond when persecuted?

First, we must check the reasons for our persecution. The promise of this beatitude is not for every persecuted person, but specifically for those who are persecuted because of righteousness (v.10) or because of Jesus (v.11). It must not be because of our foolishness, insensitivity, arrogance or hypocrisy. (See also 1 Peter 4:15.) The promise is for those who are persecuted for being like Christ their Master (John 15:18-20; 2 Timothy 3:12). Holiness can create hostility.

Occasionally, God will send us suffering as a response to a specific sin in our life, to bring us back to Himself. So we must also check to be sure this is not the cause of the persecution.

If our persecution is because of our Christ-like righteousness, then we need not try to understand anything more about the reason for our suffering. It is enough to know that we have been entrusted with a precious gift that will purify us and glorify Him.

Our first response is to **stand firm** in the faith, even though many around us may fall away (Matthew 24:9-13; Luke 21:19). Our greatest comfort and strength will be the knowledge that our beloved Master was also persecuted and has promised to be with us always (Matthew 28:20).

If others are persecuted with us, we should **encourage each other to stand firm**. Pastor George Orjih was amongst a group of Christians kidnapped by militants in northern Nigeria in 2009. George was eventually killed because he refused to convert to Islam. But a survivor told how George had spent his time in captivity: singing, praying, and encouraging the other Christians to be faithful even unto death if necessary. One recalled, "While we were lying there, tied up, George turned to me and said, 'If you survive, tell my brothers that I died well, and am living with Christ. And if we all die, we know that we die for the Lord.'"

We must **pray**.

- We can give thanks for the honour of suffering for Christ and that we are being prepared for our future eternal inheritance.
- We can pray for ourselves and for any persecuted with us, that our faith will not fail (Luke 22:32). We can ask the Lord for perseverance and endurance. We can pray that we will grow more like Jesus through what we are experiencing.
- We can pray for our persecutors (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27-28; Romans 12:14). Stephen's dying prayer was: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (Acts 7:60).

We must, like Jesus, **refrain from retaliating** against our persecutors (Matthew 26:50-53). If we are to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44), we cannot hurt them. In 1782 in Gnadenhütten, Ohio, a group of indigenous American Christians were targeted by a group of white colonist militiamen. The militiamen easily took prisoner the trusting Christians, then told them they must die. In their pre-Christian days, the indigenous Americans had been warriors and would have energetically defended themselves. But now, being Christians, they simply requested time to prepare themselves for death.

Then asking pardon for whatever offense they had given, or grief they had occasioned to each other, they kneeled down, offering fervent prayers to God their Savior – and kissing one another, under a flood

of tears fully resigned to his will, they sang praises unto him, in the joyful hope that they would soon be relieved from their pains, and join their redeemer in everlasting bliss.³

We must **love each other** as we suffer together for Christ. We are one Body. “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26; Hebrews 13:3). If it is possible, we can care for persecuted members of the Body in practical ways. We can also help them psychologically and spiritually by encouraging them to stand firm (James 5:10). Persecuted Christians often feel alone, forgotten and worthless. We can remind them that they are precious and honoured in the Lord’s sight (1 Peter 2:9; John 10:27-29), that their lives still have a purpose (1 Peter 2:9), that the purpose might even be to witness to their persecutors (Matthew 10:18). As they anticipate future ordeals we can remind them that the Holy Spirit will give them the words they need (Matthew 10:19). If there is no way to communicate, we can still help them by praying for them.

In summary, the most important response to persecution is to stand firm in the faith. We should also encourage those persecuted with us to stand firm, love and care for them as we have opportunity, be thankful and prayerful. We should love and pray for our enemies and not retaliate.

Preparing for persecution

Here in the UK, we have enjoyed many generations with almost no persecution. But it is coming. So how can we prepare for it?

The New Testament was written during a time of persecution and much of it by believers who were being persecuted. Peter’s first letter is one of the books that particularly focuses on persecution. The first set of action points occurs in 1 Peter 1:13-17. Having encouraged the Christians to see persecution as something to rejoice in because it would purify their faith (1:6-7), as something brief and fleeting (1:6, compare 2 Corinthians 4:17), and having reminded them of their salvation and glorious heavenly inheritance (1:4-5,9) and of Christ’s own sufferings (1:11), Peter then urges:

prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct (1 Peter 1:13-15 NRSVA)

From this we learn that our ability to persevere under persecution will depend very much on our thoughts. Therefore, we must prepare mentally for persecution. This preparation involves the habit of resisting temptation, and the habit of strengthening our faith by reminding ourselves of His promises and fixing our eyes on eternal realities (2 Corinthians 4:18).

³ John Heckewelder, *A Narrative of the Mission of the United Brethren among the Delaware and Mohegan Indians, from its commencement in the year 1740, to the close of the year 1808. Comprising all the remarkable incidents which took place at their missionary stations during that period, interspersed with anecdotes, historical facts, speeches of Indians, and other interesting matter*, Philadelphia: M’Carty and Davis, 1820, pp.318-319. Heckewelder (1743-1823), born in England, was a Moravian missionary in Ohio.

Later Peter revisits these themes (1 Peter 4:1; 5:10). He also re-emphasises the need to be alert and vigilant: some people fall away because pressure comes upon them in gradual increments and they hardly notice what is happening and how they are letting down the Lord (1 Peter 5:8).

Peter sets an example of thankfulness as a way to find peace in the midst of persecution. Whatever happens to us, we can always praise God our Father for the incarnation, atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; the new birth which He has given us; and the sure hope of heaven (1 Peter 1:3-4).

We will not find peace in persecution by applying reason. We will find it by faith. We know through faith that our sufferings are not meaningless, and that, in God's mysterious purposes, they will bring Him glory. But usually we do not know how and must be content to wait trustingly for that knowledge until the next life. For the duration of this life, we cling to the knowledge that our sufferings, especially our sufferings for Christ, are neither random nor pointless. They are spiritual food, oxygen and medicine, which we need in order to grow in Christ-likeness.

To summarise, we can prepare for persecution by developing faith-filled, disciplined minds and eternal perspectives.

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